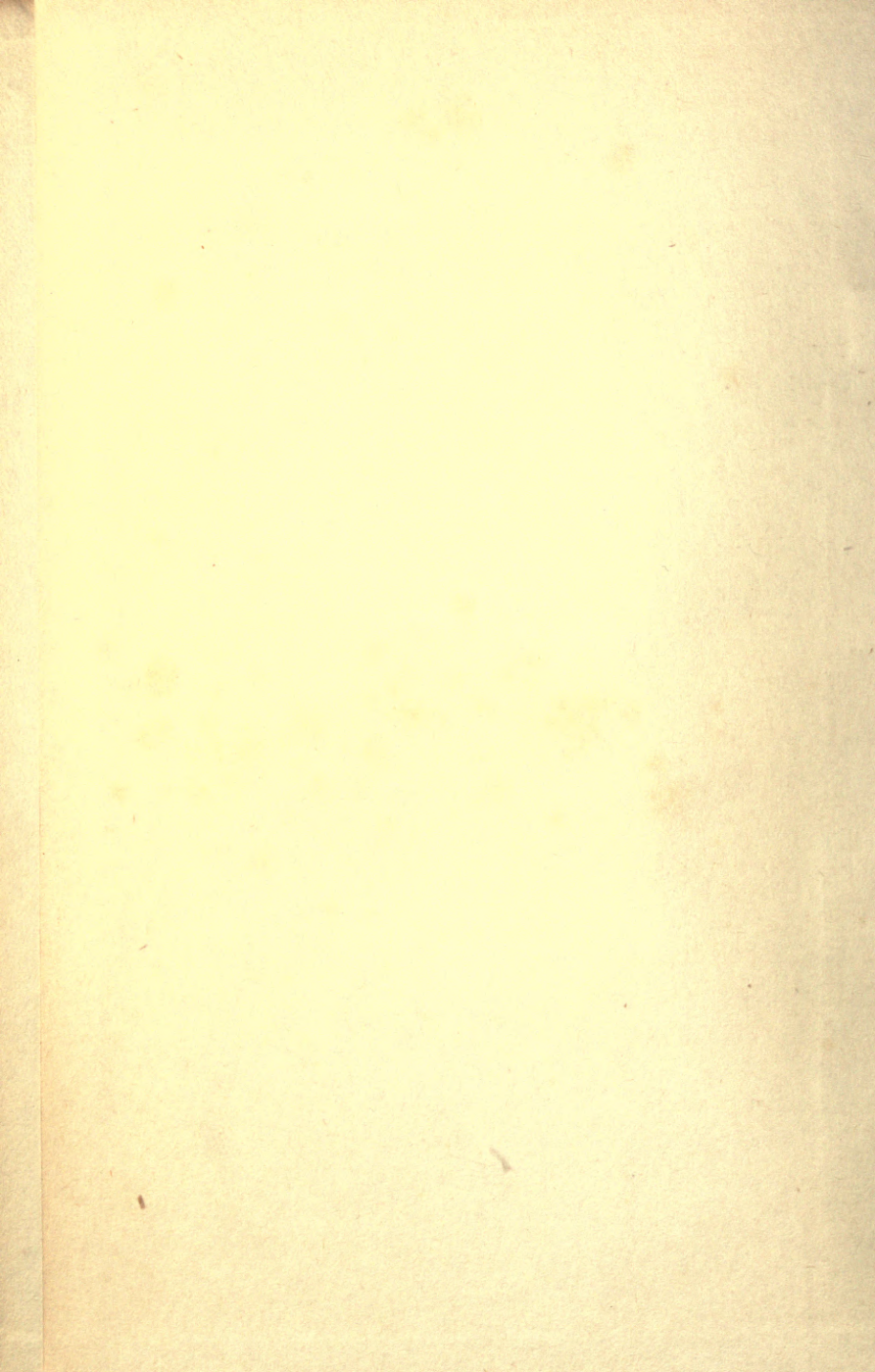


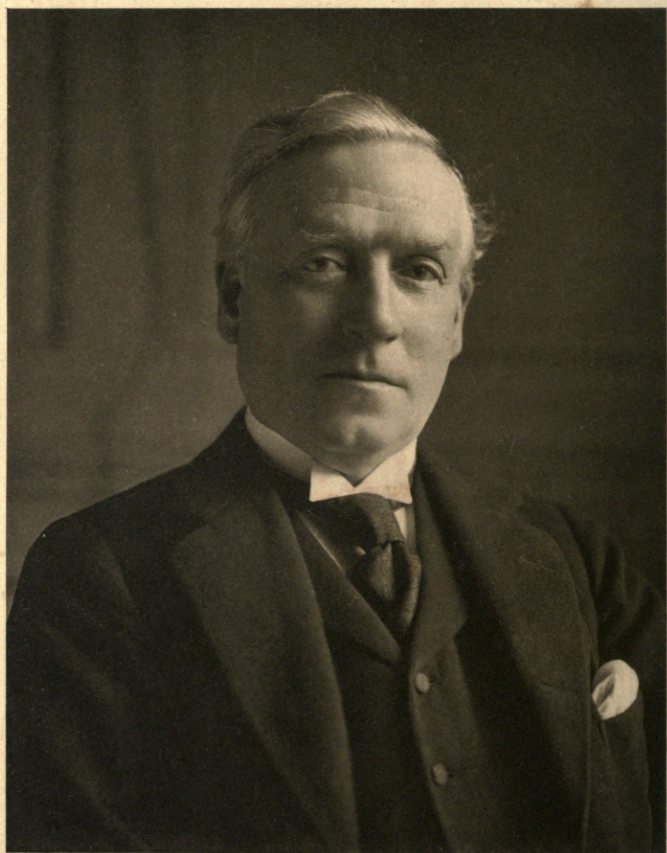


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C. K. Allen







Portrait by

Reginald Haines.

The Right Hon. H. H. Asquith, M.P.

THE RIGHT HON.

H. H. ASQUITH, M.P.

A Biography and Appreciation

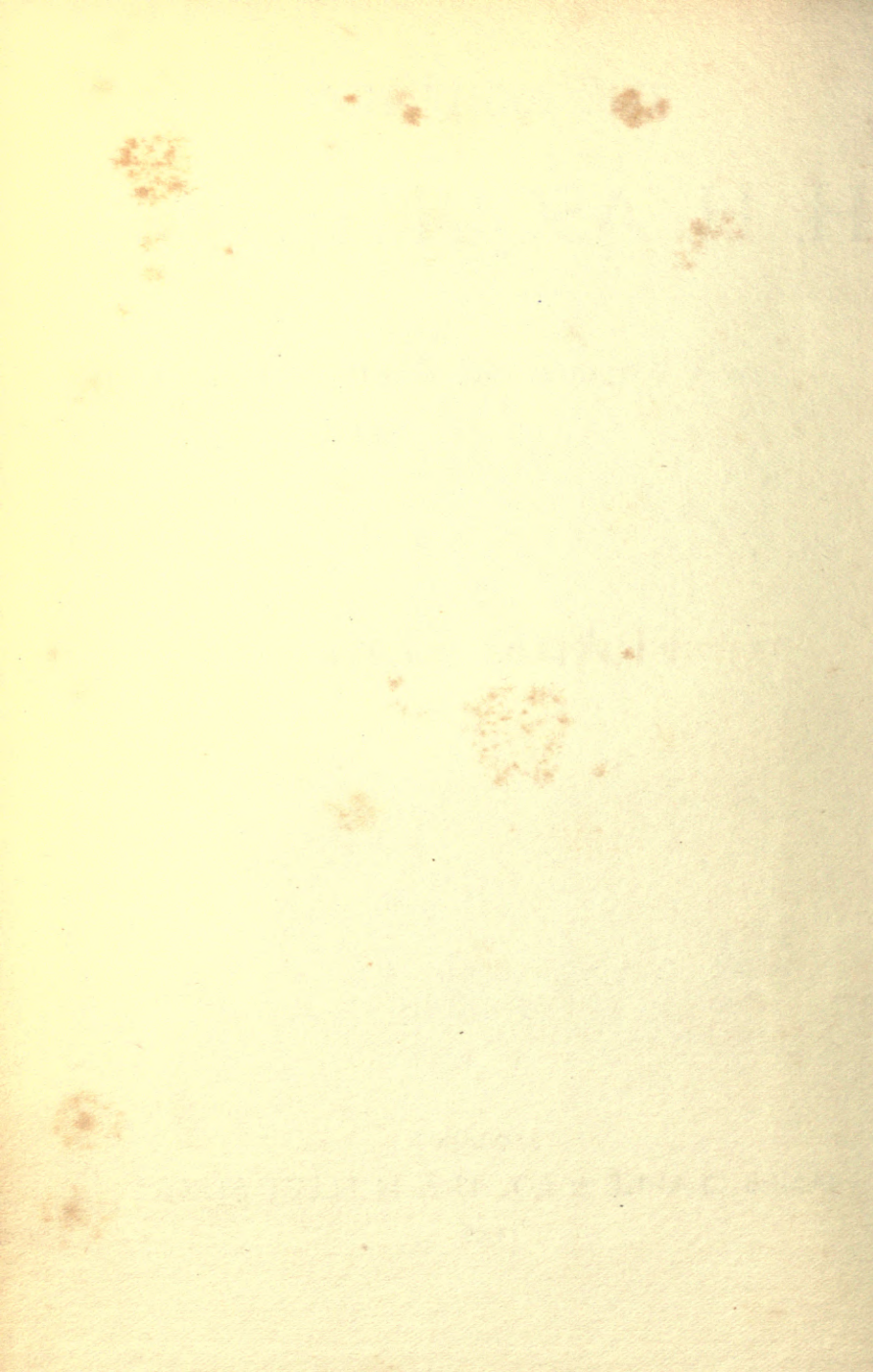
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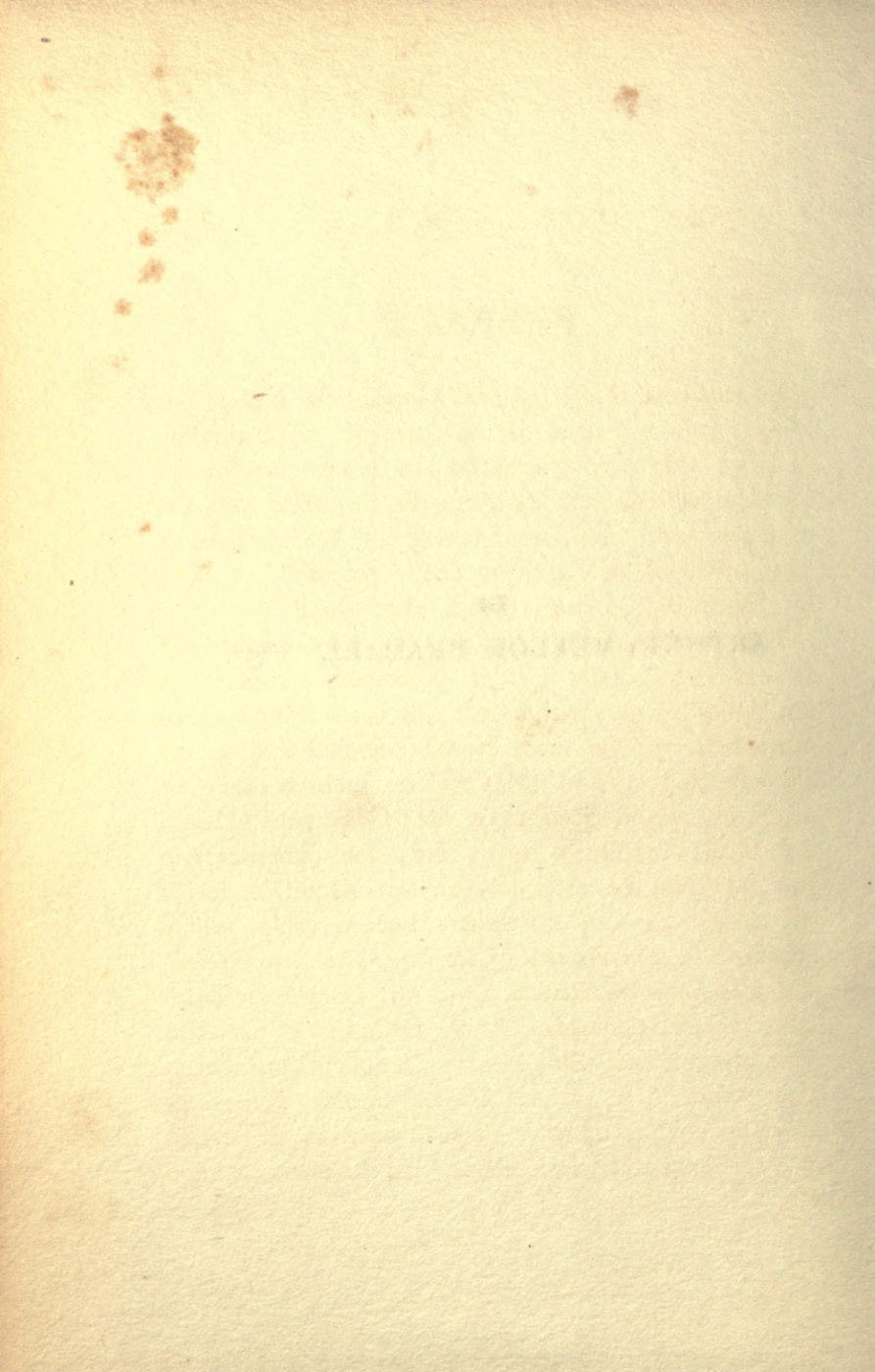
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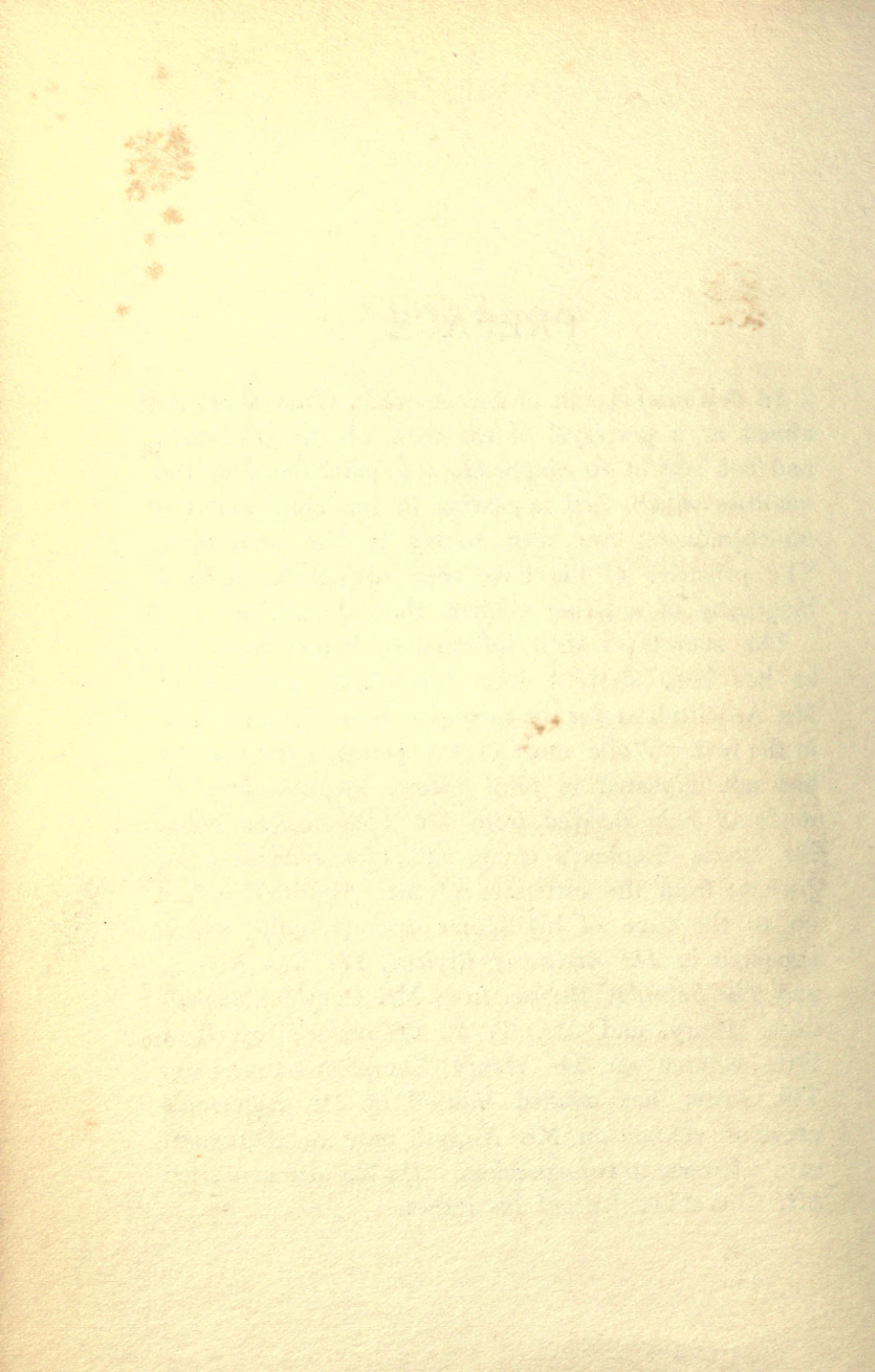
To
ARTHUR MELLOR BRAMALL, ESQ.



PREFACE

IN this brief sketch of Mr. Asquith, the author has aimed at a portrayal of the man, of the politician, and has sought to emphasise the persistency of the qualities which, first appearing in the child and the undergraduate, are seen to-day in the statesman. The privacies of life have been respected, as, in a biography of a living subject, they should be.

The sources of such information herein contained as has been derived from published estimates of Mr. Asquith have for the most part been acknowledged in the text. While most of the personal information has not appeared in print before, mention may be made of help derived from Mr. Tollemache's book, Sir Leslie Stephen's essay, etc., for references to Jowett; from the estimates of Mr. Asquith's career up to the time of his Home Secretaryship, which appeared in *The Review of Reviews*, *The New Review*, and *The Saturday Review*, from Mr. Lucy's indispensable Diary, and Mr. T. P. O'Connor's excellent little volume on Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The writer has availed himself of Mr. Alderson's previous volume on Mr. Asquith only to the extent of a reference to two speeches. He has also consulted Mr. Churchill's Life of his father.



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THE RIGHT HON. H. H. ASQUITH, M.P.

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD

HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH was born at Morley, Yorkshire, on September 12th, 1852.

The town of Morley has a history which extends back to the time of the Romans. In Saxon days it was the seat of the wapentake. Mention of the village is also to be found in the Domesday Book :

“In Morley, Dunstan held six carracutes of land subject to taxes; and other six carracutes has he there which Ilbert held, but it is waste. There was a church, a native wood, one mile long and one broad, in the time of King Edward valued at forty shillings.”

During several centuries the name of Morley does not often occur in the public records, though from this obscurity the impartial tax-gatherer of the day never failed to rescue the village when any new imposition was to be made. In the list of contributors of the poll tax and the hearth tax the names of Morley men are to

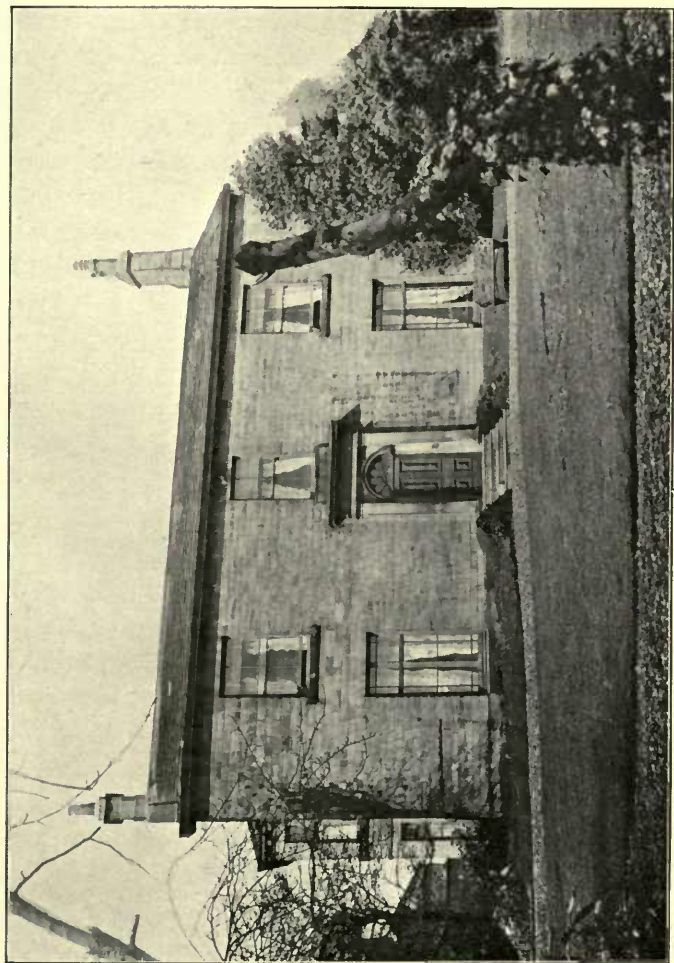
be found beside those of inhabitants of other and larger towns in Yorkshire.

Five hundred years ago, according to the poll tax returns, the population of the village did not exceed ninety-five souls, but by the sixteenth century Morley had become a place of some importance, and had begun, in common with the surrounding towns, the cloth making trade with which ever since it has been associated.

The most emphatic feature in the character of the town, however, has been neither its consciousness of the possession of ancient traditions, nor its business acumen, but its pronounced religious and Nonconformist bias. It is, perhaps, the only town in the country in which may be witnessed the spectacle of a Nonconformist chapel which at one time was the property of the Church of England. St. Mary's Church, which had become Presbyterian during the Commonwealth, at the Restoration was claimed by the Established Church, but the church house was still retained by the Presbyterians to whom, or rather to the Independents, at the end of the seventeenth century the church again passed.¹ Later, a split occurred which resulted in the establishment of Rehoboth Congregational Church. This church has some interest for readers of what here follows.

As the years had passed by the importance of the Morley clothiers had grown. The Napoleonic wars, however, seriously interrupted the trade of Morley as of other places. Wheat was 126s. 6d. a quarter,

¹ Recent distinguished ministers of the church have included the Rev. Ambrose Shepherd and the Rev. W. E. Anderton, M.A., the latter himself a marriage connection of the Asquith family.



BIRTHPLACE OF MR. ASQUITH.

and flour was sold at 8s. 6d. a stone. The poor rate was 13s. 6d. in the pound, and most of the inhabitants were reduced to a state verging on beggary. The working classes particularly were in a condition not only of poverty, but of disaffection. For this was a period not only of high prices and small trade but of an industrial revolution caused by the invention of labour-saving machinery. Morley was seriously concerned by the demeanour of some of its inhabitants, and a town's meeting was convened to consider what ought to be done.

The meeting brought together the most important men of the place, and among those whose names appear in the record is one Joseph Asquith.

This is not the first time the name of an Asquith occurs in Morley annals. There have been Asquiths in Morley for hundreds of years. Upon almost every other page of the local registers is the name to be found. And not only so, but from an early period the Asquiths were connected with the local trade in cloth. All the leading men of Morley were compelled to take apprentices from the overseers, and in a list of some of those signed on before 1767 occur the entries—Eliza Agnes and Ann Asquith, both to Benjamin Asquith; and Tobias Lonsdale, to John Asquith, 1720.

In a directory published in 1841 we have the names of the manufacturers living in Morley, and at the head of the list is the name of Joseph Asquith.

"The wool stapler was an important person in our youthful eyes," writes Smith,¹ "for was he not in the habit of periodically visiting the wool marts of the

¹ "Morley Ancient and Modern."

Continent in order to supply our manufacturers with the superior kinds of wool then in use? The wool stapler has become extinct, and we hear no more in the Morley trade of the Asquiths, the Dixons, the Dodgshuns, and the Dickensons who, fifty years ago, carried on this special and profitable branch of the woollen trade."

The Asquith here alluded to, the Joseph Asquith of the directory, was the father of Joseph Dixon Asquith, whose second son, H. H. Asquith, is the subject of the present book. At the time of his grandson's birth he had retired from business. Dixon Asquith was a cloth merchant, who had business associations not only with Morley, but with Leeds and afterwards with Huddersfield. "He was," says one who knew him intimately, "a very handsome man, very intellectual and charming in manner, and a most devoted husband and father. He took a very keen interest in the education of his children, was a good platform speaker, and much interested in any public movement, political or otherwise." He was educated with his cousin, the late Joshua Asquith—afterwards a West Riding magistrate and an eminent local public man—at Bramham College, then considered one of the best schools in Yorkshire. "He was a very genial man, certainly not reserved, and took a great interest in Morley, especially in the young men, and had a large Bible class of them. He was the founder of a mechanics' institute, when such institutions were in their infancy in Yorkshire."

In 1845 Dixon Asquith married Emily Willans, daughter of William Willans, of Huddersfield. Willans, who sprang from an old Yorkshire Puritan

stock, belonged to a well-known type of local public man. He was a West Riding magistrate, a strong Nonconformist, and a man who filled many honourable positions in the local government of his town. On one occasion he contested Huddersfield, but was not successful. If he did not display any surpassingly brilliant qualities he was very useful in his day and generation. He had married a Miss Wrigley by whom he had several children, the eldest son being John Wrigley Willans, who was to have an important part in shaping the career of the future Prime Minister.

"Mrs. Dixon Asquith," says the friend who has already been quoted, "was a very clever and intellectual woman, very witty and keenly interested in Liberalism, and a brilliant conversationalist."

She had five children—William Willans, whose early career was bound up with his brother's, and who afterwards became, what he still is, a master at Clifton College; Herbert Henry, now the Prime Minister; Eva, who married a master of the school at which her brothers were educated, and two others, one of whom died when five years old, and the other lived but a few months.

The Asquiths attended Rehoboth Congregational Church. Both Dixon Asquith and his wife had strong religious convictions, and brought up their children accordingly. The strain of the Puritan, which has never left the character of the Prime Minister, was implanted in the first moments of consciousness.

The boys' nurse was a Mrs. Ellis, who had been in the family for a great number of years. "She was an excellent woman," says the same old friend. "In her old age I used to take her any letters I had respecting

the boys to read to her; and she was so keenly interested in them. Whenever (afterwards) the boys came to stay in Yorkshire they always went to see the old nurse, and she always spoke of the Prime Minister as 'Master Bertie' with great affection."

The boys did not attend any local day school in Morley, but seem to have had a governess. "I remember the procession to which the Premier refers,"¹ continues the writer of these reminiscences; "all the Sunday schools in Morley had rejoicings at the conclusion of the Crimean War, and I remember the two Asquith boys wishing to join and carry a banner. They were then very tiny boys."

In those days Morley was a very clannish place. A man who had been born in the town never forgot the fact. It was something of which to be proud. There was no town good enough to be compared with Morley, though, owing to the fact that Rome had the happiness to share with the Yorkshire town the distinction of being built upon seven hills, a concession of recognition was made to the Papal capital. In this local life the boys began to grow up. Herbert, it appears, was by no means a strong boy. The town was still not too big for everyone to know everybody else, and so their identity was familiar to those who met them. But their Morley life was not to be a long one, and presently the family moved to Mirfield. Here the boys attended the Mirfield Moravian School as day pupils.

From their earliest days their education had engaged the thoughts of their father. He took a great interest

¹ Mr. Asquith once recalled this incident in the course of a speech at Morley.



MR. ASQUITH (ON THE LEFT) AS A CHILD, WITH HIS SISTER, EVA,
AND HIS ELDER BROTHER, WILLIAM WILLANS.

in their home work, and spent himself freely to improve their information. But at Mirfield a terrible blow was to fall upon the young family. Their father, though only in the prime of life, was suddenly called away. Deeply as she suffered, however, Mrs. Asquith turned courageously towards the future. The dearest hope of her husband and herself had been that their children should be well educated. In furtherance of the hope she sent the boys soon after their father's death to Fulneck Moravian School, near Leeds. This was their first, and in fact their only, boarding school. The institution was conducted on rigorous lines and the Asquiths were not excepted from the operations of its rules. Unhappily their physique was not equal to the strain, yet the boys never uttered a complaint.

Ultimately, however, Mrs. Asquith discovered how matters stood and accordingly took the boys away with her to Huddersfield, in order that they might attend the College there as day pupils.

The training which Herbert Asquith was now receiving was calculated to strengthen the Puritan foundation laid in infancy by his parents. Opinions are not usually formed between the ages of eight and ten. But it is then that the methods which are later to be employed in forming these opinions, the moulds in which the flowing ideas are to be shaped, are made and made to endure. The City of London school did much for Asquith; Jowett of Balliol did still more. But higher up the river of his being was another stone turning the stream of character and setting it to pour through the deep channel of Puritanism. However modified in character may be the stream to-day,

however it may have changed the shape of the channel through which it flows, the channel is still a Puritan one.

Mrs. Dixon Asquith, as has been indicated, was a woman of lofty character and happy intuitions. When her husband died she gave herself up entirely to her children; but as they grew older, the question of their education became more pressing. The case of the two boys particularly was a serious problem. At this point their uncles John and William Willans came to the aid of their sister.¹

John Willans's suggestion was that the boys should be sent to him in London, should live in his home, and together attend the City of London School.

Mr. John Wrigley Willans, who is happily still alive, was, as has been said, the eldest son of William Willans of Huddersfield. He lived in St. Mary's Road, Canonbury, and near him dwelt his brother William. Both men were married, and William had a large family, but John Willans and his wife were without children, and were therefore all the more ready to welcome their two young nephews.

Mrs. John Willans was the daughter of Sir Edward Baines, the well-known member for Leeds and owner of *The Leeds Mercury*. Sir Edward was a man of considerable personality in his day, and, through his paper, exercised a great influence in his own town. He held a position such as few modern provincial

¹ A few years later the mother of another Liberal politician was to be faced by the same question of a son's future, and she also was to have her difficulty solved by an uncle of her young son. The story has already been told of how Richard Lloyd, the uncle of Mr. Lloyd George, took the boy to his home and had him educated.

editors can hope to occupy. He had become editor at the extraordinarily early age of eighteen. He was a well-known economist, and supported the repeal of the Corn Laws. He published a history of cotton manufacture, was an educational expert, and sat for Leeds from 1859 to 1874.

His daughter, Mrs. John Willans, inherited some of her father's qualities, but had others of her own which went to the making of a character of great strength and beauty. She seems to have exercised an extraordinary influence on all minds with which she came in contact. She was a woman of great understanding, in the days when an intellectual woman was looked upon with some uneasy suspicion by many excellent people. Yet she did not win admiration by mere charm of manner, but by what can only be described as a quality of sheer goodness which, wherever she went, seemed to radiate from her. She was welcomed in every house she visited, and her grace and nobility of mind gave her friends of all ages.

To her nephews, when they arrived, she became a second mother, and her influence upon Herbert Asquith was of a lasting kind. After a while the Willanses went to live at Bickley and were accompanied by the boys. Later, however, John Willans was invited to go to Leeds to help his father-in-law in the conduct of *The Leeds Mercury*. The question then arose of the future of the two nephews, now beginning to make their way at the school in the City, to which they went daily. Their mother, when they had first come to London, had left Huddersfield for St. Leonards, where, during their school and Oxford days, she continued to live.

The final decision with regard to the boys was that, on John Willans's departure, they should go to lodge with a Dr. Whittingham. Dr. Whittingham, while not greatly illustrious in his profession, was not only a competent practitioner but a man of literary taste. To a boy as fond of reading as was Herbert Asquith such a home was certain to be useful. Dr. Whittingham was devoted to his two young lodgers. There were in his opinion no two boys like them, and he never disguised in conversation, not merely his hopes but his expectations of their future. From Dr. Whittingham the boys removed to Pimlico to the house of a Mrs. Barrett.¹ It was while returning to their Pimlico home in the evenings that they used to pass the House of Commons and to pause and watch the members whom they saw entering. The Asquiths' last home in London was with a Mrs. Mundy, of Highbury, whose daughter well remembers the keen interest shown in politics by Herbert.

Herbert Asquith, as he moved among his Highbury friends, began to show just those qualities for which he is best known to-day. The manner of the successful barrister and the Prime Minister was also the manner of the boy of Highbury. Even in those early years he showed the possession of a curiously equable temperament. It would be less true to say that he was reserved than that he was self-contained. He showed perfect confidence in himself and a collected air usually unexpected in a boy. He was never flustered or self-

¹ Mrs. Barrett was the mother of the Rev. George Slatyer Barrett, B.A., D.D., of Norwich, who for forty-two years has been pastor of the leading Congregational Church in East Anglia, and who, in 1894, was Chairman of the Congregational Union.

conscious at the children's parties he attended, as so many growing boys are. He exhibited little emotion, and he set a guard, not only upon his manner, but his habits. When, as he grew older and began to go out more, the entertainment offered by his friends extended beyond the hour of ten, he would frequently excuse himself on the plea of work. This was not a mere excuse; for he worked far into the night. But it was an indication of the strength of the purpose which ruled him, even in those early days.

From the day on which he first arrived in London, he seems definitely to have proposed to himself a scheme of life, and to have determined to give himself wholly to the scheme's accomplishment. He has never been highly gregarious, but it was not aversion from his kind that led him to avoid evening amusements. He felt he had work to do, and he made that feeling rule his social life. This firmness of conduct encouraged the hopes of his friends. Moreover, his personality was already beginning to impress itself upon those with whom he came in contact. He not only took himself, but made other people take him, seriously. This is an unusual achievement for a schoolboy, and whoever accomplishes it does so at some little risk to the friendship, genuine but informed with a certain quality of patronage, which the senior considers it proper to offer to the junior. But if sometimes people were puzzled by young Asquith, he impressed everyone as a boy with resources. It was safe to forecast for him an uncommon career. Dr. Whittingham was not the only man who believed that the boy was destined for great things. All had the feeling. And the boy had it himself.

In spite of his devotion to his plan of life, however, he was no recluse. He was always pleased to see his friends if only they would do him the kindness of not monopolising his time. He did not, however, avoid recreation. He was a good walker, as he is still. To-day he may often be seen wending his way steadily through Richmond Park.

His reading was wide. But if he specialised he did so in the very unusual department—for a boy—of constitutional history. Of this subject, as he grew older, he came to have not merely the superficial knowledge of the clever schoolboy, but a proper understanding. He began soon to show that he apprehended something of the principles of political science, and it is significant that as he progressed through the school, history prizes almost more than any other kind went his way.

Asquith attended Union Chapel, Islington, the minister of which was the famous Dr. Allon. Allon was not only a man of piety and learning, but a great influence in the religious life of the country. The young man was certainly attracted by the minister, and in after years placed on record his warm appreciation of Allon's qualities. In 1908, in opening a bazaar in aid of the funds of Union Chapel, Mr. Asquith observed:—

“The name and work of Union Chapel will always be associated with the name and work of Dr. Allon. In the first place, he was a man of authority—the authority which comes from will and from personality. He had great gifts of speech and of writing; but beyond and beneath all that, giving to those gifts colour and inspiration and strength, he had what is most needed in a Christian minister, deep and broad human instincts

and sympathies, a temperament, I have often thought, not altogether unlike that of Martin Luther, who would not allow the devil a monopoly of the best tunes, and a mind always open, always accessible to new thoughts, and always able to extend the range of its intellectual and spiritual horizon. He was a great man, and this work is his abiding monument."

Asquith was a worker in connection with the chapel, among other things doing duty at a night school in Lower Islington. His interest in the work continues, for he still sends it an annual subscription. It will be perceived that he had already begun to care for the improvement of the lot of the struggling classes. His real devotion to the cause has never been adequately acknowledged. Yet no man has ever been more temperately effectual in serving his poorer brothers through a long course of years than has Mr. Asquith.

He was a member of the Highbury Young Men's Society, and the pride of it. Upon a small scale, indeed, his position with the young men was a forecast of what was to be his place in the mind of Oxford. The Society regarded him already as a man of consequence, and were quite conscious that they had among them one who would not remain in their narrower circle, but find his work in the service of a world without. When he came back to them, as he sometimes did in the Oxford days, they received a strong impression of his increased growth and originality. But though his quiet assurance had grown, he never exhibited any "side," and they none of them quarrelled with his reserve, because they knew it of old.

When the two boys had come to London they had

at once become, according to arrangement, day pupils at the City of London School. The City of London belongs to a type of academic institution which is essentially middle class. The boys miss the benefit of the communal system of living which obtains in the ancient foundations of wider reputation, but escape the demoralization by which that system is sometimes accompanied. In character it corresponds with the grammar schools of the large provincial towns. Founded in 1442, the school is controlled by the Corporation of London, and, on Mr. Asquith's attainment of the Premiership, that thoroughly Tory institution gracefully recognised the fact.

During the early part of the second half of the last century there was a great educational awakening. This renaissance culminated, in the sphere of elementary education, in the well-known Act of 1870. But the institutions which to-day are recognised under the name of secondary schools were also experiencing a quickening. The country was calling for educational efficiency, and one of the first schools to answer the demand was the City of London.

Mr. Asquith entered the school in 1864. Its premises, which are now upon the Victoria Embankment, were then situate amidst the splendid vehicular confusions of Cheapside. It was in Cheapside, two hundred and fifty years before, that the greatest English witness to civil and religious liberty had drawn his young impressions of the pageant of life. Perhaps it would not be difficult to find superficial parallels between the temperament of Milton and that of the youth who so long afterwards was to tread the same stones. It is easy to

suggest that the same sights that coloured the poet's mind coloured also, if in a lesser degree, the mind of the future statesman.

Certainly the imagination of young Asquith was touched by what he saw. His mind had the whole panorama of London on which to feed. Ever overshadowing the street through which in eager boyish fashion he and his companions passed rose St. Paul's Cathedral, the acknowledged centre of London life; while in his ears rang day by day the pleasant chimes of Bow Bells, offering the gift of citizenship to young arrivals whose ears could catch the sound. Daily the boys walked to school. 'Bus rides were threepence and fourpence in those days. Their way was down the gloomy Goswell Road and through many a scene of squalor. The contrast between such surroundings and the City, with its air of wealth, must often have struck the thoughtful boys. Such experiences were ideal ones for the future statesman. Some taste of life he must have got even in those early years. There could be no sudden awakening, no new wonder at perceiving the shadow thrown across many lives, such as must have been, in some time perhaps still recent, the ungrateful experience of politicians of less vehement early training.

At the time that the Asquiths entered the City of London School the headmaster was Dr. Mortimer.¹ But two years later the school passed into the control of a young and vigorous man of very remarkable character in the person of Dr. Abbott. What Abbott has been

¹ Distinguished headmaster, scholar of the old school, Canon of St. Paul's.

to Asquith the latter has never wearied of telling. Every school function in which he has a part is marked by a new effort on his part to pay in words something of the debt which he knows he will never be able to discharge. "He was," said his pupil, when Home Secretary, "a scholar of the finest type, who taught his pupils, as well as any schoolmaster of the day, the meaning and the use of life."

When Prime Minister, the pupil spoke again: "There was," he said, "no old boy from the City of London School who would not agree that the most precious possession he took with him from that school was a sense of that strong, self-sufficing, but at the same time widespread, many-sided personality."

Dr. Abbott in those early days was, by universal consent, a man of simply extraordinary power. Had he thrown himself into politics it is possible that he might have been Prime Minister before his pupil. Certainly there seemed nothing which he could not do better than other people. One of the advantages with which he started was a marvellous memory. An old school-fellow of Mr. Asquith's recalls how once Abbott told him that he could walk down a street and then remember every shop name upon the walls. Like Macaulay, he could also repeat a piece of poetry after reading it only once. He had taken a double first at Oxford, and a great reputation had followed him to the school when he assumed the headmastership. Abbott was a man of intense personality who knew how to get the best out of his boys. He not only wanted them to excel, but he possessed the power of communicating his ambition to them. He had no mercy on

slackness, and was a great believer in efficiency. But if he was a great disciplinarian he was also a great teacher. He had a wonderful gift of so illuminating a subject as to make its outlines interesting to the dull intelligence. "I never knew a man who could get so much out of boys," said an old pupil of his and school-fellow of the Asquiths.

But if Dr. Abbott had all the qualities of a great schoolmaster he had one fault, though a fault which was the result really of his excellencies. Wonderful as were his powers, he was unaware of them. He had no idea that his gifts were greater than most men's. Thus ignorant, he made demands upon his boys which required their utmost exertions. He treated them as though they could do anything of which he himself was capable, and if they failed he regarded the failure as the result mainly of slackness on their part. Everybody had to work, and to work at the highest pressure.

Something of the strain put upon the boys may be realised from the statement that while many boys' work began at eight in the morning it did not end until ten at night. From the moment of his coming Abbott imposed his character upon the school. It was not merely that he determined to raise the City of London to the highest possible point of efficiency; he meant to give it a personality. He meant to put himself into it, to make it a force, an entity. Owing to an interregnum in the headmastership the control of the school, before his coming, had grown slack. Temporary headmasters, however able, cannot be expected to get a proper grip upon a school world in face of the circumstances of their employment. The boys of the City of London

School, therefore, had felt the reins a little loose, and had allowed themselves to go a good deal as they pleased.

Dr. Abbott, as soon as he set his foot in the school, ruled absolutely. He was determined that he should. The very first morning after his arrival he ordered the whole school of 650 boys into the hall for prayers. It occurred to some of the boys as they saw him standing at the desk that he was a little man, and for the moment they were flattered into the old security against discipline. They were undeceived at once. Abbott was master as well as headmaster of everyone from the first moment.

Besides having a strong idea of giving his school an entity, Abbott had distinct ideas in regard to the teaching to be given. He was a great classical scholar and a man of wide reading. But what most distinguished the curriculum, as he made it, was the greatly increased attention given to English. Abbott was probably the first schoolmaster to give English its proper place in the timetable. He believed intensely in familiarising the boys with the best literature in their own as well as in the dead tongues.

The relation between Abbott and Asquith was not at first a close one. The boy had to escape from the junior classes before he could hope to come under the notice of the headmaster. But when once Abbott came to know his pupil he was wonderfully drawn to him. "He was," as he afterwards told the old boys of the school, "a pupil of great promise." From the beginning of this more intimate acquaintance he began to entertain hopes of what the boy would do, and never since those early days has he tired of speaking in Asquith's praise. To-day he never meets an old boy

of the school without bringing in a reference to the boy whom he trained to become Prime Minister.

But even before Asquith came under the immediate notice of Dr. Abbott, he was proving his ability, as also was his brother, William Willans. The latter, indeed, in his first years at school appeared slightly the superior of his brother, though afterwards his ill health placed him a little behind. Both boys were great workers. Even in the lunch-time they were always engrossed in their books. Their cousin, the late Joshua Asquith, used to recall that when he met them in town, the two boys always brought books, over which they were poring at every odd moment.

It was when Asquith got into the fifth form that his headmaster began to suspect the existence in the boy of unusual qualities and power. In those days the fifth form used to learn writing and book-keeping. Dr. Abbott was a humane man, and, like all kindly persons, he had imagination. As he watched young Asquith bowing over the desk in his effort to acquire a neat, round hand, the headmaster fell to recalling his own early experiences and sufferings in the acquirement of the same art. Stung to sympathy, he used, therefore, to invite young Asquith from these labours at handwriting into the sixth form room, where he gave the boy an occasional five or six minutes of extra supervision in his classical work. "I am afraid," said Dr. Abbott,¹ "that it is about the only good thing I did for him, because as to the rest he did everything for himself. There was nothing left but to place before him the opportunities of self-education and self-improve-

¹ To the old boys.

ment—simply to put the ladder before him, and up he went.”

Asquith as he progressed in the school always supported the headmaster in his effort to keep up the tone and the intellectual standard of the senior form. He also took an important part in the school debates. He had decided opinions on most subjects, as was to be expected. Even at this early stage he knew a good deal about the political movements of the period, and his regular reading of *The Times* kept his mind alive and his information fresh. He showed an aptitude, as natural as it was remarkable, for politics, and his deliverances were not those of a schoolboy. They were the speeches rather of a thinker. Dr. Abbott testified to several qualities of Mr. Asquith's early debating powers, but what most impressed the master was the clarity of the boy's expression. He was not, however, merely clear in the utterance of his ideas. He showed a skill, strange in one so young, in the formation of his sentences. “He was one of the very few,” said Dr. Abbott, “who could plunge into an intricate and involved sentence with such an artistic prescience of what he had to say, that all the members of the period fell, as it were, into harmonious co-operation, so that in the end he brought his hearers to a full and satisfactory, a logically and rhetorically complete and weighty conclusion without any sacrifice of point, force, and, above all, of clearness.”

Herbert Asquith had a calm assured manner, not a little curious in a boy of his age. His school-fellows respected rather than liked him. He did not draw them to him by winning personal qualities. He put

too much restraint upon himself ever to be expansive in his friendships. He was in fact too wise for the ordinary schoolboy irresponsibilities, and yet he was no prig. No one has ever said that of him as a school-boy. He was as a whole very quick, very accurate, very thorough. He could do well in an hour what other boys took two hours to do indifferently. His taste for constitutional history was well known to his school-fellows. His grasp of the intricacies of the subject, a grasp most unusual in one of his age, impressed everybody. And when another boy than he would express to a companion the ambition of going in for the history prize, the daring youth would be questioned: "Going in for the history prize? Is Asquith going in?" "Yes." "Then what is the use of your doing so?"

This gives some idea of the position the boy was making for himself. He was in fact carrying everything before him. He did not play games. In the first place there was little opportunity. There was no playground, and even when a team could be got together to play some club on the outskirts of London, it was found, as frequently as not, that the local eleven contained many boys from the City of London School, who preferred playing for the local club, for which they played regularly, to reserving their services for the school. But, apart from this discouragement of school enthusiasm, Asquith had in him little of the sportsman. Cricket was not then the fearsome thing of averages and form it has since become, nor was Association football the institution we now know. An ignorance of games then counted for less than it counts to-day.

Asquith's recreation, apart from walking, was reading

The Times. During the dinner hour a friendly bookseller permitted the boy to study its pages at his shop. It is to be feared that *The Times* has ill requited this early devotion !

Asquith read particularly the parliamentary reports. It was a curious taste for a schoolboy. But Asquith, though he was not without friendships, and later showed himself sufficiently a part of the school life to accept the captaincy, was, like many thoughtful schoolboy natures before and since, always inclined to live a little withdrawn from, and in advance of, his fellows. Already he had learnt simplicity and reserve ; already he had begun to exercise a rigid self-control. Even now he was cherishing his energies. His story from the beginning has been one of stern determination, and it has shown a determination which has opposed itself not only to objective difficulties but to the personal forces that sometimes get out of control. It is not enough to say the boy was ambitious ; many boys are that. But Asquith realised in a greater degree than many, and earlier than still more, exactly how best to give himself to fulfilling his ambitions. Never for one moment has he diffused his quality. And from the first moment in which he began to spend his gifts he spent them in the one way that was certain to yield the maximum return. No man who has wrought any deep effect has, when confronted by his success, a sensation of complete surprise. He may know his power and yet be free from vanity. For he must acknowledge a Giver. It is impossible for the boy destined for greatness not to know it. From any pettiness of self-approbation no one was more free than Milton. Yet

none knew better than he that with him there had come a new force into literature.

The youth who was still a schoolboy of the City of London knew that he was made for some considerable place, and his life was a purposeful one. He began even in those early years to concentrate all his forces.

In that school in Cheapside the figure of the young Asquith may be seen in imagination to-day. Eager for knowledge, for news, for impressions, for every thought which will bring him into contact with what seems outside, he goes daily to his form, mingles often with his school-fellows. But before him there must be some vision, some promise, some knowledge, not of a genius but of a purpose, a power, a force, that must carry him some day through every door but those that only genius can unlock.

Years afterwards, at a dinner given to celebrate his appointment to the Home Secretaryship, Mr. Asquith allowed his mind to go back to those early days. In the course of his speech he said :

“ Though an ancient foundation, the City of London School, as a school, had only existed since the beginning of the reign of the Queen. They had no ancient traditions to feed upon outside the academic world. They had hardly any great man they could appropriate to themselves. Their buildings—now that they were demolished, he might say without offence—were contracted, gloomy, and a trifle squalid. They had not that which was regarded by most people not only as an inseparable incident, but as the essence of an English public school—a playground. Instead of those spacious, attractive, and romantic surroundings under which the life of most of the great public schools was carried on,

they spent their days, not only within the sound of Bow Bells, but the noise of the traffic of Cheapside itself. All this would be regarded by the outside critic as drawbacks and disadvantages, but he was not at all sure that there was not a good deal to be said on the other side of the account, and that there were not some influences that they enjoyed, and by which they benefited, that were not within the reach of their contemporaries at Eton, Winchester, and Harrow.

“He remembered, a good many years ago now, when the Manchester Grammar School and the City of London School were winning scholarships at Oxford and Cambridge, and were rather throwing the old foundations of the country into the shade, that an article was written by an eminent schoolmaster of the day, the present Dean of Westminster, in which he endeavoured to account for this somewhat disquieting phenomenon, and the explanation which he gave, and which had in it more than one element of truth, was this, that the town-bred and town-educated boys, brought into contact, as they were every day of their lives, with the sights and sounds and life of a great city, brought into their reading an element which could not be contributed from elsewhere, mixed their knowledge with actuality and reality, and thereby, when they came into open competition with those who had spent their youth in the cloistered and sequestered seclusion of the great public schools of the country, they were better qualified for the fray, and could render a better account of such education as they obtained. He believed there was a great deal of truth in that view of the matter. For his part, when he looked back on his

own school life, he thought not only, and perhaps not so much, of the hours which he spent in the classroom or in preparing lessons at night, he thought rather of the daily walk through the crowded, noisy, jostling street; he thought of the river with its barges, its steamers and its manifold active life; he thought of St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and the National Gallery; he thought even sometimes of the House of Parliament, where he remembered they used occasionally to watch, with a sense of awestruck solemnity, Members disappear into the inner recesses schoolboys were not allowed to cross to discharge the high and mysterious functions their constituents put upon them.¹ These might be the illusions of youth, but he was certain there was not one among them who would not agree with him that the presence and the contact of this stimulating environment contributed a large and useful influential element in their youths."

The record left by young Asquith at the City of London School is one which testifies clearly to the fact that his success was not a spasmodic one. He gained prizes every year from the day in January, 1864, when he first entered the school and joined the second class. By the end of the summer term he had won the Divinity prize and the Latin prize.

In the year following he carried off the prize given for general proficiency. In 1866 he was in the fourth form and took the Classical Progress prize; while the year following he won the Second Sir William Tite Scholarship, of the value of £20, to extend

¹ Mr. Asquith was living in Pimlico at the time of this majestic experience.

to the time of leaving, and carried off the first Classical prize.

In 1869 he entered the sixth form and became captain of the school. In this capacity he declaimed in Greek the praise of the school's founder, Sir John Carpenter, at the annual celebration. His prizes in this year included those for history, Latin and English, among the books he received being Mommsen's "History of Rome" and Wordsworth.

But his last year was the year of his most splendid triumphs. He was again the school captain; he again had the honour of declaiming the praise of the founder—this time in English—and he carried off Dr. Conquest's gold medal for general proficiency and good conduct, Sir James Shaw's Classical medal, and the Mowlem prize for English. His greatest achievement, however, was of another kind. His mind had always been turning towards a wider exercise of his intellectual forces than lay along the road likely to be travelled by many of his schoolfellows. His ambition carried him in anticipation to the life of a University. He set himself to work for an Oxford scholarship, and in 1870 he entered. It probably surprised nobody, and certainly not himself, when he was able to write to his headmaster, Dr. Abbott, and inform him that he had won.

The scholarship was of the value of £75 per annum and was tenable at Balliol College. Probably, however, he did not realise, as he looked forward to the new life, what the circumstance was to mean to him that he was to go to Balliol, and not to another college.

The seventy-five pounds were not of course enough

to maintain him at the University. In addition, therefore, he obtained a Grocers' Company scholarship of fifty pounds, and when, thirty-eight years afterwards, he became Prime Minister, he took occasion to thank that Company for what it had done for him.

The boy, though he left the school full of hopes and ambitions, could not do so without some regrets. Particularly did he feel leaving his old headmaster, Dr. Abbott. It not uncommonly happens that as a boy progresses in his school, and especially when he draws near to becoming its head, he finds himself surveying his master with a changing perspective. The lines of severity, the frowns and shadows, seen upon the face at a distance, have mysteriously disappeared, leaving only the expression one finds upon the face of a friend; "the stern conductor" is seen to be a man.

It was in 1870 that he entered Balliol, the Balliol that was to shape his career, that was to leave traces never to be removed. Another chapter was beginning in his record of struggle. Doubtless he would have done much had his way lain in other directions. But what he could have done, what any boy could have done, in any but what were the actual circumstances of his life, is a mere idle speculation. It remains that it was the City of London School which set Mr. Asquith upon his road and that bade him farewell, hopeful of much in the forty years that then lay before him, but over which now, as Prime Minister, he looks back—

" Oh, the great days in the distance enchanted,
Days of fresh air in the rain and the sun,
How we rejoiced, as we struggled and panted,
Hardly believable forty years on."

CHAPTER II

OXFORD

THE shrewd observer, if asked to state what personal influence he found most alive in politics to-day, would doubtless pass over the names of the two great men who for twenty years dominated the House of Commons, and point, away from Hughenden and Hawarden, from Whitehall and St. Stephen's, to Oxford and to the late master of Balliol.

Until the person interested in the subject of this book has apprehended something of Benjamin Jowett, he cannot hope to realise in any important degree the character of Mr. Asquith. For, as much as it is possible for one man to make another, Jowett made Asquith. It is as the finished product of the Jowett factory that the Premier stands out to-day, and he is not the only vital result of that system that we know at the present time. Lord Milner is another example.

Whether or not the Jowett type of intellect is the finest which exists, it is certainly an effective one. It is characterised by wide intelligence, an intense love for enquiry coupled with a disinclination to act quickly, a certain hesitation to adopt permanent positions, and a great and wonderful discretion. It was this discretion which repressed the fresh impulses of youth, which sequestered young, hot advocacies,

ordered enthusiasm to the hall of examination, and kept within the sphere of intellect. Its effect was to make those who held it influential in a company of thinkers and of less account before the people. It made few orators, for oratory will sometimes fly from sheer thought to the arms of pure emotion, and emotion was at all costs to be avoided. The utterance of the Jowett man is marked by complete lucidity, splendid reasonableness, perfect phrasing; but lacks warmth. For any person who, like Lord Milner, was later to be, first a journalist, and then a representative of the Crown, such a training was perhaps a happy one, although had there been in the character something more permissive of sympathy, the Bloemfontein Conference might have had a happier issue. But the advantages of the Jowett training were and are to be seen only in one part of the life of Mr. Asquith. That training gave him an oratorical style and manner which, for certain qualities admired in the House of Commons, is unsurpassed. It makes an appeal to intellect which is answered by many who, if they have not had a Balliol, have had an Oxford training. But it is wasted on the platform.

It is fortunate for Mr. Asquith that, though the country decides who shall represent it at Westminster, it has little influence on political promotion. It is upon a man's success in the House of Commons that his parliamentary success depends. Outside reputations then go for nothing. Whatever claim has been derived from exterior triumphs must now be reviewed. The Jowett man is truly in his sphere in a debating chamber where reason sweeps emotion before it. And so the

significance which has always been allowed to his speeches in the House and the remoteness from full popularity which to some extent he has suffered outside, Mr. Asquith may attribute not to inherent deficiency, but to the influence of the Oxford of his time.

Mark Pattison treated his men as the ambitious gardener treats a rose tree, the product of which he designs for the show. As the gardener cuts off every bud but two or three of the best, that into these shall flow the strength of the whole tree, so he sought to compress the impulses and desires of his followers into a single line of intellectual action. But Jowett, while he set his men definitely to achieve something in the world, did not believe in too much specialising in their college work. He wanted men to grow; he wished to see their culture wide rather than deep and narrow; above all, he wanted them to have personality. Yet, as he grew older, he emphasised more and more his desire that they should do something definite. It had not always been so. Jowett's earlier influence was scarcely consistent with his later. At one time he had not only been speculative, but had encouraged his men in speculation. But afterwards he came to the conclusion that the way to practical success was not paved with metaphysics. "It was," says one who knew him, "in his later view, doubtful wisdom to encourage young men to speculate."

Jowett, therefore, modified the method, if not the spirit, of his teaching. No man ever realised better the difference between definite and indefinite success, and he began to depreciate metaphysics and turn a man's thought to the career, whatever it was, which lay

beyond the life of the University. The curious thing about Jowett's impatience of speculation was that he had as his colleagues more than one metaphysician who owed his early metaphysical training to the Master himself. Particularly was this true of T. H. Green and Caird (afterwards Jowett's successor as Master). But Jowett, though he had once speculated, had never been a concentrated thinker. "The aim of metaphysics is to get rid of metaphysics," was his position as he expressed it.

He began to think more and more of effectiveness in the world. He did not, it is true, desire mere vulgar success. But he did very much want to see his men grasping the reins of power. He wanted to feel that Balliol ruled England.

Benjamin Jowett himself was a man of extraordinarily intense personality. The force was compressed, though it often overflowed in a way that in his best pupils was impossible. Though broad, even in his religious opinions, he had no tolerance either for stupidity or affectation.

He was a phenomenally shrewd judge of character. He measured the material as it came up to him and selected his men. The dull, plodding man was probably better in another college. For certainly Jowett concentrated upon ability. When Asquith came to him he saw that here was a mind worthy of his shaping.

Jowett's delight in the young man it is easy to comprehend. They were, it is true, men of wholly different up-bringing. But Asquith, who was not to be won even by a person of consequence unless he saw

in that person some quality he admired, was quickly drawn by Jowett's intuitive kindness. Jowett, on the other hand, discovered in Asquith the very qualities he most liked. The obvious Puritan strain may have appeared to him slightly novel, but born judge of character that he was, he saw that it would the more certainly lead its possessor along the path to eminence and success.

The absorbing quality of Asquith's determination and his quiet but unyielding consciousness of his own merits set him before the Master of Balliol as a person well worthy to be cultivated.

As a student Asquith was certainly admirable. "Asquith," a friend, who knew him well, said of him, "is the best examinee in Oxford."¹

This was the surest way to attract the Master of Balliol. Jowett, unlike his contemporary at Lincoln College, Mark Pattison, had a supreme belief in examinations. In everything that concerned University life he was all for individualism. When he had come to Balliol as a reformer, he had quickly determined that the way to raise Oxford was not through the University but through the college. He believed that there was no use in attempting to shape anew the policy of the University as long as Convocation possessed a veto. Graduates, though of every different quality of mind and outlook, each possessed a vote, and the right to be one unit in shaping the University of which they were members. It would be impossible to reach all these scattered units and to bring the sum of their influence to carry improvements. It was because he felt this that

¹ *New Review*, 1894.

Jowett determined upon making the college of which he had become Master the subject of his reforms and allowing those reforms then to permeate the University. In the same way he believed in individual treatment of his men. He was a tutor rather than a professor, and though he had a very strong idea of the relationship which should exist between a don and an undergraduate, and insisted upon the maintenance of that relationship, he believed in cultivating the friendship of every man who interested him. He encouraged confidences, although he sometimes fell rather suddenly upon anyone guilty of conversation irrelevant to the subject under discussion.

One of Jowett's guiding motives was a desire for power. But he wanted power rather for the college than for himself. From all lower forms of ambition he was perfectly free. His great hope and object in life was to make Balliol the factory of public opinion, classical scholarship, political influence. Though no man was less a part of the Catholic revival which had swept Oxford while he was a young man, Jowett had the instincts of the Jesuit. Only in his case the end which justified all the means was not Rome but Balliol. Yet, though he won the power he wanted for his college, he did not believe in attaining his objects by any rough-shod methods. He had no rash manner of achievement. Before all things he was discreet. Mr. Tollemache¹ tells us that he preferred to go round the mountain rather than scale its heights. "If he found his way barred, or if to surmount the bar threatened to be too toilsome a process, he turned aside to

¹ "Benjamin Jowett," by Lionel Tollemache.

seek a passage by some other way. He had such a feeling for the traditions of moral influence that he would not dissipate it by allowing it to break against the obstacles that were for the moment irremovable."

Jowett was not without human weaknesses. It was said that, judge of character though he was, his geese were always swans. "He liked men," the same friend tells us, "who coloured their essays with his ideas."

He talked a great deal to his favourites upon political subjects. Jowett was of course a Liberal. But he extended to Liberalism the same spirit of philosophic doubt as he gave to his religious opinions. He admired but did not always trust Gladstone. He was a Latitudinarian Whig. He believed in the ascendancy of the landed gentry. He liked the agricultural labourer, of whom he had experience, and wanted to preserve the type, just as he wanted to preserve the House of Lords. He was opposed to Home Rule. "Don't you think the Irish should have their way?" an undergraduate guest once asked. "Have you ever been in Ireland?" asked the Master. "No," was the reply. "Then you have a very good reason for asking such a question."

Socialistic tendencies repelled him. But, as was to be supposed, his attitude towards awakening democracy was always a tolerant one. To a young man of lineage who was asserting the superiority of his own class Jowett observed: "A man who lives as you do in the first society in the country should remember that there is as much vulgarity in thinking too much of social advantages as in affecting to despise them."

The truth was that Jowett saw that the government of the country could not always continue in the hands of a few families. He believed that the great development of industrialism was not only changing the face of the population, but changing the laws which governed it. But he clung to the aristocracy, and even ran the risk of being called a tuft-hunter, because he believed that, in Mr. Tollemache's words, "as soon as that hand falls from it, then, instead of ceasing to act, the irresponsible lever will be manipulated by demagogues."

He cared little for mere learning except for the distinction which it won for his men when they possessed it. Upon matters which he felt deeply he was shy of speaking. But he was a perfect confidant. He was often surprising in his opinions, as when he supported the Coup d'Etat. But his attitude in other matters was wholly conservative. It is interesting to note to-day, in view of his influence upon Mr. Asquith, that he repeated with apparent approval to Mr. Tollemache the remark made by a friend of his that he would rather be governed by the five most incompetent men in England than by the five wisest women.

This, in brief, was the man who was to shape the opinions of the young Balliol scholar. Many of the traits already described as existing in Jowett, who, like his pupil, was of Yorkshire stock, have appeared in Mr. Asquith. Both men had dogged natures; neither has been ready to waste his strength of purpose. Each loved to feel the world yielding to his grip. And each has had the discretion to go round when it was impossible at the moment to climb over.

Asquith went up to Oxford in the autumn of 1870. He was accompanied by his brother, William Willans, and the pair became known as "Asquith" and "Little Asquith" respectively. William was "Little Asquith" on account of his size; as a scholar he has always been a man of marked individuality, though of a somewhat retiring disposition. The manner of Herbert Asquith was a continuation of the manner he had displayed at school. He held himself a little apart, had not much time for relaxation, and went on with his work. He was always a worker. But even in this respect he showed the moderation and discretion which are part of the man. He was never guilty of late work and wet towel follies. He worked hard in reasonable limits, and then went to bed. He never lost sight of one advantage while he was seeking another. He did not forget that health must not be risked if other things are to be hoped for with any assurance. "He had an extraordinary power of consistent work," said one who remembers him, in conversation with the writer, "yet he was not a man who one would say ever slaved. He was without the affectation of working late. He never seemed driven. Milner, on the other hand, often seemed so. Asquith had no metaphysical leaning. He was not distinguished for anything but classics. But he had a remarkable power of using every gift he possessed to its full capacity. He was essentially lucid in his speaking and writing. He had no unfathomable depths. In his personal relations he was never effusive. But he was no recluse. He never estranged himself from his fellows. His manner was a little dry, but he was quite an agreeable man to meet.

He was not, however, one whom it would ever be possible to call genial, though after he became a Fellow he saw his friends a good deal.

"He was very alert. Perhaps it was his alertness that most impressed one. His whole manner betokened this quality. And in the street his gait was alert also. In temperament he was very unemotional and equable. The Union distracted him from his work somewhat, but never in such a way as to show that he had lost his sense of proportion. He always impressed one as a man who had a plan of life well under control. In appearance he was pale and delicate-looking. He must, however, have really been very tough. For he never was ill. When he became a Fellow (by competitive examination), Jowett was very pleased. The other candidates were very good men. But Jowett had a great opinion of Asquith, and was glad to have him on his staff.

"Asquith was known to hold Liberal opinions, but he never impressed one as being a democratic Liberal. As a man, he did not strike one as a person of genius. But he was thoroughly efficient."

The religious influences of Oxford at this time were of a very mixed kind. Herbert Spencer and Huxley were pouring shot and shell into the citadels of faith. Many gates were left open and many surrenders made. Some of the dons were professed agnostics who were unwearied in their attacks upon religion. But there were others of another kind. In Balliol T. H. Green was a great force. He was a man of deep spirituality. He had been brought up as an Evangelical, and he was now a Churchman of the very broadest type. But he never cut himself off from his

early faith. To the attitude of the Master himself reference has been made. But in spite of the vein of worldliness which ran through his character and kept alive his passion for earthly domination, he was a man of deep religious feeling. Moreover—and this needs to be emphasised—though he sometimes compromised his own better impulses, and though he was a disturbing force to many minds, he never interfered to try to affect a man's religious convictions. Nonconformists who knew him and worked with him cannot praise him enough in this respect. "If there was one thing Jowett disliked," said one of his young men, "it was a man who was not true to his convictions."

He suffered all men to go their own way in pursuit of truth. His tolerance of opinion from which he dissented was certainly not at fault.

The Asquiths were Congregationalists, and as such they sometimes attended George Street Chapel, the minister of which was the Rev. David Martin, brother of the Rev. Samuel Martin, of Westminster.

The achievements of Mr. Asquith were all in the sphere of classical scholarship. It is true that he had to take philosophy in "Greats," but he distinguished himself because his mental capacity was so excellent that it could accomplish anything rather than because he had any philosophical bent. His mind was too practical for metaphysics. And in this practicality he had the approval of Jowett, who, at the time of Asquith's arrival in Oxford, had come to take the second of his two attitudes as a teacher. It was Asquith's business to take a high place in the schools. On the other hand, it was not his business to spend

himself upon metaphysical futilities, as so many men were doing in Oxford at this time. The only distractions he allowed himself were walking and the Union. He was never an athlete. He did not aspire to be a blue either in cricket or 'Varsity rowing. Yet that he liked to see his 'Varsity triumph on the river is shown by a story of the man as he was in later years when success had come to him.

It was the day of the Boat-race. Oxford had sustained a long succession of defeats. But at last, on this occasion, the Dark Blues once more got the victory. Asquith was looking on, his face beaming. "We've chawed 'em up this time," he cried triumphantly.

Asquith walked a great deal, and never slackened in his old fondness for the exercise. His other recreation, as has been said, was the Union. But as the success of the work he expected to do would to some extent be in proportion to the use he was able to make of his voice, the Union ought really to be regarded, not as a distraction, but rather as one of his schools.

H. H. Asquith got a first class in "Mods." in Trinity term, 1873, and in "Greats" in Trinity term, 1874. No names familiar to-day are to be found in the list in which his name appears, though later, in Trinity term, 1875, when William Asquith also got a first class, appear the names of "C. Gore" and "T. Raleigh."

In 1874 Asquith won the Craven scholarship. This was the only one of the great University prizes which he carried off. He competed for the Ireland, which his son Raymond was afterwards to win, but he was only *proxime accessit*. The Craven is awarded after an examination in Greek and Latin scholarship. Its value

is £80 per annum for three years. Two scholars are elected every year in Trinity term. The year Mr. Asquith won it he was bracketed first with another (Mr. H. H. Broadbent, of Exeter). The missing of the Ireland was a disappointment, but it could not have seriously discomfited such a temperament as his. His mind was, all the time, fastening on essentials and ignoring the decorative. He knew exactly what he wanted, and when there was anything which he might have had, but which he regarded as unnecessary to his success, he let it go by. He made himself supremely effective. But as long as he could feel power he was indifferent to outward show. If he was efficient, if he could feel that the world, or some part of it, was yielding to his grasp, he did not greatly care whether he excited comment. He was then, and he remained, impatient of the superfluous. When he became a Fellow he was the only don at Balliol who was content to rest a "B.A." A "B.A." he remains to this day.

Asquith by the time in 1874 when he got his Fellowship had obtained a great vogue. The Asquith year at Oxford is still remembered.

He was made a Fellow at the same time as A. C. Bradley, until recently Professor of English Literature at Oxford. In the same month he read the lessons in the College Chapel on the occasion of the appearance in the pulpit there of Bishop Colenso. Asquith, considering his vocal powers, was not an effective reader. The list of the Balliol staff at this time is a document of a good deal of interest. It reads thus:—

"Benjamin Jowett, Master in 1870, Regius Professor of Greek, Hertford Scholar; Rev. E. E. Woollcombe,

M.A., W. L. Newman, M.A., J. L. Strachan Davidson, M.A. (Dean), John Purvis, M.A., Rev. T. K. Cheyne, M.A., Richard Lewis Nettleship, M.A., T. H. Green, M.A., Tatton R. Gray, M.A., Alfred Goodwin, M.A., W. H. Forbes, M.A., Evelyn Abbott, M.A., A. C. Bradley, M.A., H. H. Asquith, B.A., F. de Paravinci, M.A.”

Among the Honorary Fellows was Robert Browning. Nettleship was the great classical scholar who was frozen to death in the Alps in 1892. To T. H. Green reference has been made. Goodwin was a man of great learning and fine humility. Abbott also was a fine spirit; he was a cripple who, though he had to travel in a bath chair, contrived to do most things for himself.

Asquith's contemporaries in the University included Herbert Paul, of Corpus, the well-known M.P., and Thomas—afterwards Sir Thomas—Raleigh. Raleigh succeeded Asquith as President of the Union. But Asquith himself was the chief figure of his time. As his reputation grew he began to exercise an extraordinary ascendancy, and to excite, if not devotion, at least an enthusiasm for his parts such as is seldom the portion of the don.

The poles are not further asunder than the respective temperaments of Tennyson and Asquith, and yet in the vogue which was slowly created by the personality of the latter there seems a resemblance to the enthusiasm which forty years before had been generated in another University by the character of the young but already acknowledged poet.

In *The Saturday Review*, in the days when that journal enlivened its pages by the publication of many unguarded comments, appeared a tempered tribute to

the man who at the time of writing was Home Secretary. The article has its interest to-day for the indication it gives of how Asquith's vogue at Oxford impressed an opponent. The writer refers to Mr. Asquith's contemporaries.

"Nearly all these men now occupy distinguished positions at an unusually early age. Sir Alfred Milner is Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue,¹ Mr. J. H. Warren is the President of Magdalen, Mr. Paul was the member for South Edinburgh and is a successful journalist; Mr. Raleigh is an eminent professor. Of this set Mr. Asquith was the orator and the idol. When he was incubating a speech for the Union, the set went about saying: 'Asquith is going to speak on Thursday'; when he had spoken the set went about saying: 'Did you hear that splendid thing of Asquith's about Dizzy's string of complacent dukes'?

"Even Jowett joined the conspiracy and told all his powerful visitors at the Lodge what a clever fellow Asquith was. At this period the young don had a defiant and somewhat churlish manner; he was encased in the buckram of the aspiring *bourgeois* whose knowledge of the world is not sufficient to prevent his garb from creaking and rustling offensively, but who soon learns that the helpless members of the upper class are not his enemies but his best friends."

This picture is not unctuously complaisant. But then it was not intended to be. And it has at least this value for Mr. Asquith's warmest admirer, that it acknowledges his ascendancy at the University and the greatness of his gifts. Beneath the alleged defiance

¹ This was written in 1895.

of his manner there must have been some attractive quality; or a sway, almost unequalled in recent times, would scarcely have been wielded with such complete success. It would have been wielded however in any case, and simply for the reason that Asquith's was the strongest nature in the circle. The personality projected to us over that space of nearly forty years is the personality of the man to-day. Determination that was expressed in vigorous action on occasion but that was more often concealed, as the force of the man was husbanded against the time when it could be extended to the full—keen insight into every question of the moment—and guiding every other quality that admirable discretion which grew with the terms—such, at twenty, was the man who is Prime Minister at fifty-six.

He was still in outlook the Nonconformist of Yorkshire. There might be a veneer of something else, but it was only a veneer. He still preserved the splendid Puritan quality of going straight on, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left. The performance of what another man had called Duty was instinct to him. He probably would never have been able to conceive of any alternative action to his sticking to his work, to his using opportunities, to his carrying everything and everybody before him.

References have been made to his contemporary, Lord Milner. Milner also had a vogue, and some expected more of him than of Asquith. There were frequent speculations as to which of them would go the further in after life. Another name which comes up in connection with this period of Oxford history is that of one who was later to sit in the same Cabinet as

Mr. Asquith. James Bryce at this time was the Public Orator, and it fell to his lot to render Latin honours on the occasion of the visit to the University of James Russell Lowell.

Asquith's career in the schools was a brilliant one. But it was not in the schools that he made his most lasting impression or in which he gave the truest indication of what he was to be. His most emphatic success was gained in the debates at the Union. There can be no question that during the time he was at Oxford his figure overshadowed those of all others who were members at that time. And those who heard him there never doubted that a career, not merely of brilliance, but of great and effective public service, would be his in later life. He entered the House as, and continued, a strong Liberal, though his Liberalism then somewhat resembled Jowett's in being Whiggish and lacking in democratic sympathies.

His policy of never diffusing his quality he applied to work at the Union as he had applied it elsewhere. He did not speak often. But so great was his sway that the fact of the infrequency of his speaking made his intervention, as he calculated it should be, a matter of the greatest importance. He avoided the mistake of allowing it to be said that he was always glad of an opportunity of opening his mouth. On the contrary, he made every one feel that when he did speak it was an event. He allowed no one to place upon him a less than just valuation. His own set were devoted to him, as has already been shown, and even had he sometimes been careless of his reputation they would have watched over it.

Asquith's last speech at the Union was delivered in 1875, the subject being Disestablishment. The president at the time was Thomas Raleigh. A Balliol man, and a contemporary of Asquith, has in his diary the following entry under date May 31st, 1875: "Debate at the Union; H. H. Asquith made a splendid speech in favour of Disestablishment."

The debate is fresh in the memory of the diarist, for he also took part in it. One of the speakers, now the Rev. Robert Hadden,¹ who has since become well known, in opposing Disestablishment had challenged Nonconformists to mention any real grievance against the Established Church, and the diarist had mentioned the burial question. Particularly had he referred to the case of the funeral of the Rev. Henry Rees, which had been attended by Welshmen from all parts of the Principality, but at which no service had been permitted.

Mr. Asquith, rising afterwards, moved the adjournment of the debate, and when it was resumed later asked the indulgence of the House in order to permit him to exceed the usual time limit of twenty minutes. It would, he said, be the last opportunity he would have of addressing them. He spoke altogether for three-quarters of an hour. The utterance made a great impression on the minds of those who heard it. The circumstances were, of course, special. The acknowledged orator of the University was making his last speech. But it impressed also for its own qualities of conviction and vehemence. And it is not

¹ Prebendary Russell Wakefield, in an interesting article on the Prime Minister in the *Woman at Home*, alludes to Robert Hadden, now the broad-minded vicar of St. Mark's, North Audley Street, in which church the Prime Minister frequently worships.

a little significant to-day that his last speech should have been upon a reform in an attempt to achieve which he was later to take so prominent a part. However much Oxford might have modified his views, he was still a Nonconformist, and there can be no doubt that for this question he has cared more than for others in the programme later to be formulated at Newcastle.

There may have been lawyer touches in the speeches he made when the Disestablishment Bill was before Parliament. But such expressions as "we understand," used in the Commons, betoken a want of information as to details, rather than as to the general question. Even at Oxford he knew something of what Nonconformist grievances were. And in this last speech at the Union he met without hesitation the challenge which had been thrown down. "An honourable member," he said, "challenges us to mention a single real grievance due to the existence of a State Church. I will take it upon me to enlighten this inquirer." Here he paused, as though to consider what grievances he should enumerate. Then he looked round. "Why," he exclaimed, "the difficulty is to know, not where to begin but where to end." Then followed a speech of great power.

With this fitting climax he brought his days at Oxford to a close. His eyes were now turned to London, and thither he now went to begin reading for the Bar.

CHAPTER III

THE BAR

MR. ASQUITH was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, in June, 1876. The student of his character cannot do better than to examine closely this part of his career. Nothing is more illuminative, not merely of the policy which inspired his progress at the Bar, but of his attitude towards politics and life. At the City of London and at Balliol he declined to diffuse his quality. But at school and at Oxford lavish friendship is irrelevant to practical success. Indeed, its distractions may even prove inimical to progress. And the boy or undergraduate who holds himself a little aloof knows that, however much he may be refusing possible graces, he is at least not involving the practical success of his career. A boy, of whom it is expected that he will wind up his school life by taking an open scholarship, is supposed to know his own business when he locks himself up and gives himself to his work. At Oxford a man whose manner is the reflection of a natural and acknowledged superiority may do himself no harm by declining to share in every gaiety of the life around him. No one will seek, for no one could hope to find, a method of punishing him.

Moreover, the schoolboy and undergraduate will not suffer, but gain, when he concentrates not only upon

his work, but on a particular study. Nobody will be the less inclined to encourage him. He will be told, if he is told anything, that he is right. Asquith had avoided metaphysics at Balliol, and than speculative adventures nothing is more diffusive of one's quality. But he risked nothing, he displayed no courage by following at school and at Oxford a definite line in relation to friendship and work. When he decided to continue it at the Bar, however, it was a different matter. Courage was needed to come there without influential friends, and without either the manner, or a desire for the manner, which attracted immediate and effusive friendships, and, almost before work was offered to him, dictate what that work should be. But he had the courage, and because he had the ability, without which the courage would have been futile, he was able at last to see the triumph of his policy.

He made up his mind when he was first called to the Bar that he would only accept good business. For a young barrister, with small acquaintance among solicitors, to come to such a determination argued a strength of purpose quite unusual. Some of his friends shook their heads. They shook their heads more when they saw him in the act of carrying out his policy. One day he received a criminal brief. He promptly declined it. He would not be a criminal lawyer. He has, it is true, since accepted Old Bailey briefs; for instance, he appeared in the Euston case. But he knew that if at the beginning of his career he hesitated, or his policy showed any signs of want of definition, his name would miss, and perhaps miss for ever, the particular significance he wished it to have.

In pursuance of his plan of life, he decided that he would not do much circuit work. The circuit he had joined was the North-Eastern, which in those days included a number of men who were, or who afterwards became, well known. Among them were L. W. Cave (afterwards Mr. Justice Cave), Herschell (afterwards the Lord Chancellor, and the only lawyer besides Mr. Asquith himself who ever made a real success in Parliament), Maule, Littler and Waddy. Others were Messrs. Atherley Jones, Tindal Atkinson, T. Milsom (now Judge-Advocate-General), Fenwick (a contemporary of Asquith at Balliol and afterwards a police magistrate), and Frank, afterwards Sir Frank, Lockwood, Solicitor-General when Mr. Asquith was at the Home Office.

But at the Bar there is a feeling that the best men stay in London. A barrister with a great provincial reputation may also get good work in the law courts, but he is not likely to get the very best. The circuit men develop into general practitioners, the London men are specialists. Mr. Asquith meant from the first to be a specialist, and has only cared to go on circuit when anything particularly remunerative has been offered him. From the first, then, he was a London man.

At the time he was called he had a great reputation derived from Oxford. But in Bar circles there is a kind of freemasonry to which, by those who enjoy it, admittance is made somewhat difficult. Asquith, it was believed, was not unconscious of the stir he had made at Oxford. He came to the Bar with the same complete assurance of ultimate success as had accompanied him through school and University days. But

those already practising were not certain that they liked this assurance, and there was a tendency to say of him that if he was so confident in himself, he might continue to do without the help of others.

The year following his call to the Bar he married Miss Melland, daughter of Dr. F. Melland, of Manchester. Dr. Melland, who is happily still alive, had a large practice in Manchester, and is a man of wide culture, especially learned in architecture and botany. He comes to London every year, and possesses, in old age, a splendidly robust mind.

The young couple went to live at Eton House, John Street, Hampstead. This street, which the Liberal pilgrim will find near the Hampstead Heath station of the North London Railway, has literary as well as political associations, Keats having at one time lived there. In the process of eliminating superfluous "John Streets," the London County Council are proposing to rename the street Keats Grove. It is built upon a much more gentle incline than many of the streets of Hampstead. The houses are of the type popular in the suburbs in Georgian times, and are built of stone slabs, painted a yellow which quickly collects smoke and grime. Several of the houses have a generous allowance of garden, and in the summer John Street is a pleasant leafy byway. Later in his career Mr. Asquith found a new home in Maresfield Gardens in the same suburb.

Mrs. Asquith was a woman of great sweetness of character. She had a highly spiritual nature, and by her love and sympathy was of incalculable assistance to her brilliant young husband. She was of very gentle

disposition, was devoted to her home and her children, and had a great power of attraction. Mr. Asquith went backwards and forwards to his chambers daily. He lived quietly, did not go out a great deal, and gave himself to his work. His manner, as it was known in Hampstead, was very much the manner of the boy at Highbury. He was cordial rather than effusive. He was always ready to greet and help his friends but had not much time for social relaxation. He did not impress people immediately by his manner; he avoided display, and it took a very shrewd judge of character in those days to guess what he would become.

The Asquiths at one time attended Lyndhurst Road Congregational Church, the services in which had been begun by Dr. Horton while yet an undergraduate at Oxford. Mr. Asquith indeed had been one of those who signed the requisition which called Dr. Horton to take up the work at Hampstead, and though he does not now attend the ministry of the Congregational Church, his interest in Lyndhurst Road is still alive, and has been proved to be so on more than one occasion. In 1901, for instance, when it was intended to celebrate the twenty-first anniversary of Dr. Horton's pastorate, Mr. Asquith was asked if he would take part in the proceedings. At the time the invitation was conveyed to him he was the central figure of a great and enthusiastic function at the National Liberal Club. His mind was experiencing a great sense of party approval. But when in the midst of this scene of enthusiasm the request was made to him he was quick to respond. "I shall be delighted to come," he said. This has always been his way. It may be difficult to

arouse his interest in new causes. But the old, the things of his earlier manhood, whether they are friendships or causes, he never forgets. This faithfulness has been one of the strongest-marked of his characteristics. It is a part of his nature, but it is also indicative of his sense of proportion. At no moment, whether of elation or depression, does he allow himself to forget whatever, at more normal moments, he would consider to be due to any person or any work.

Even when first he went to Hampstead Mr. Asquith was known to take an interest in politics. But his chief efforts in those early years were given to improving his position at the Bar. The struggle, however, at first was a hard one. For some time he continued in obscurity, and that this was so is shown by a remark heard in an Oxford common-room, and afterwards recorded by a writer in *The New Review*. A don was expatiating upon fame. "The worst of our system," he said, "is that nobody ever hears anything of our crack men. Look at Asquith! What a career he had here, and now his name is never mentioned!"

The remark partakes somewhat of common-room irresponsibility. The speaker was in too much of a hurry. Though Mr. Asquith had started out without powerful friends, and though his manner did not bring them flocking round him, his Oxford fame and the reputation he began to acquire as a speaker, as his opportunities for speaking increased, were not lost upon some of the most prominent Liberal politicians of the time. A good friend at this period was Mr. Chamberlain. This may seem curious to-day to those who suppose, and suppose wrongly, that the

wide differences of political views, which in later life separated the two men, also involved a breaking of personal relations. Mr. Chamberlain had become interested in the young Liberal barrister, and had advised Mr. R. S. Wright, at this time his counsel, to take Asquith into his chambers in Paper Buildings. Mr. Wright—afterwards well known as Mr. Justice Wright—had a large and important practice, particularly in the very lucrative department of railway work, and the association was to Mr. Asquith most valuable. It is interesting to note, *à propos* of Mr. Asquith's chambers in Paper Buildings, that later, when he succeeded to the seniority on Mr. Wright's departure for the Bench, he took in Mr. Roskill (now K.C.), who in his turn took into his chambers Mr. Asquith's son Raymond, to whose extraordinarily brilliant career at Oxford reference has already been made.

Whilst in Mr. Wright's chambers Asquith took pupils, and when time permitted he worked up Mr. Wright's cases for him. These cases, as has been said, were many of them railway ones. Gradually, therefore, the junior began himself to acquire a reputation as a railway lawyer, and ultimately his railway practice was a very important one.

A circumstance which indirectly was of the utmost importance to Mr. Asquith's success at the Bar was the passing of the Corrupt Practices Act, which had been introduced by Sir Henry James in 1883. Sir Henry had been one of the first to recognise Mr. Asquith's ability, and to express that recognition in the way most useful to a young barrister, namely, by giving him work.

Of the Corrupt Practices Act Mr. Asquith was a complete master. But when a new Act, full of intricacies, takes effect, it creates, for a time at least, a good deal of confusion in the minds of those who have been accustomed to work upon the principle laid down by whatever, if any, Act applied before the passing of the new one. The Corrupt Practices Act was one of great importance, and Liberals particularly were anxious that its provisions should be generally known and understood. Accordingly the Liberal Central Association requested Mr. Asquith to write a volume explanatory of the measure. He had already shown himself an accomplished writer upon politics and economics by his contributions to *The Economist* and *The Spectator*. But the book which he now wrote was his first. It was published by the National Press Agency under the title of "An Election Guide: Rules for the Conduct and Management of Elections in England and Wales under the Corrupt Practices Act, 1883." The title page announced that it was "prepared by H. H. Asquith, of Lincoln's Inn, Barrister-at-Law." Looking at the little volume to-day, it is seen to be marked by just those qualities of lucidity and directness which have distinguished both Mr. Asquith's forensic manner and his platform method. The shortest words are used and the simplest. In a note at the beginning it is stated that the book is intended to be a guide for election agents "which will show them what they may lawfully do, and what they must avoid."

Compared with many legal tomes, the book appears a mere pamphlet. But it is small merely because of its author's extraordinary power of concentrating ideas

into a few words. Those competent to express an opinion pronounce the book to be one of the very best of its kind.

The result of the publication of this volume was to make its writer recognised as an authority upon the new Act. He was soon inundated with junior briefs in the first crop of cases arising through the passing of the measure. He appeared in the Stepney election petition in February, 1886, with Mr., afterwards Mr. Speaker, Gully; he was with Mr. Pope and Mr. Bigham in the Aylesbury case; he was with Mr. Waddy in the Ipswich actions, and in the Lambeth case with Mr. Pope. He was now enjoying a large practice at the junior Bar, and a considerable reputation both for brilliancy and for the less glowing quality of accuracy. He showed a complete mastery of facts and, when a point of law was involved, great knowledge of law.

But his reputation was one restricted to legal and political quarters. He only began to interest the general public when he appeared without a leader to defend Mr. Cunninghame Graham in the Trafalgar Square case in 1887. Those in court at the time are unwearied in their praise of the eloquence of his advocacy; and, though he did not get his man off, his own reputation from that moment became something of a national one.

The next of his triumphs was his appearance before the Parnell Commission. He was there as junior to Sir Charles Russell. Sir Charles was from the first a great believer in Asquith, as was Sir George Lewis. Mr. Stead says that it was Sir George who first convinced him that Mr. Asquith was going to take a very high place in life. "He was the first man who tried

to din it in my unbelieving ears that Mr. Asquith was certain to make a great name in the world."

The Commission met in February, 1889. The first witness was Mr. Soames, from whom Sir Charles Russell got very little. The second witness was to be the manager of *The Times*, who had conducted the negotiations for the purchase of the letters said to involve the guilt of Parnell. It is a well-known practice for the leader to cross-examine alternatively with the junior barrister engaged in the case. But the *Times* manager was one of the most important, perhaps the second most important, witness in the case, and it was assumed therefore by everyone that Russell would himself cross-examine, particularly as so far he had got nothing on which to carry on his case. When Mr. Soames sat down the Court had adjourned for lunch. Then it was that Russell amazed his junior by telling him that he was to cross-examine the next witness.

"But this is most absurd," said Mr. Asquith to his leader; "he is one of the most important witnesses in the case, and of course you will cross-examine him yourself." "No," said Russell; "I'm tired, and you will do it well enough."¹

"Well enough" would have been regarded as a somewhat tame comment when the witness at last sat down. The manager did his best, but *The Times* had no case, and that such was fact Mr. Asquith discovered almost at once by an extraordinary feat of intuition. The remarkable feature of his success in this case was not that he got it only after patient cross-examination spread over a number of hours. He got it at once.

¹ *Review of Reviews*, 1895.

When the cross-examination was over his reputation was made.

He only had one difference with Russell, and that was when he came to him while they were both staying at Tadworth, and gave him a number of legal points which he said ought to be mentioned in Russell's final speech. Russell, says Mr. Stead, who tells the story, was intent upon a speech not merely of forensic but of historic interest. He felt he was not only Parnell's advocate in a court of law, but Ireland's defender in the court of the world. For a moment therefore he was impatient of the counsels of his junior. Mr. Asquith, on the other hand, was not an Irishman, and he was too good a lawyer not to feel that there were legal as well as national and political questions to be considered.

After the Parnell Commission his practice became such that he was able to apply for silk within a year; and in February, 1890, he became a Q.C. He now did a very good class of business. But he was not satisfied. He determined not to rest until he got the work which was the best possible. Such work is usually to be found in practice before the House of Lords and the Privy Council. It was upon work of this kind that Mr. Asquith had begun to concentrate, and with such success that ultimately he and his friend and political colleague, Mr. Haldane, were able to divide between them all the best business before the Privy Council.

There can be no question that to appellate work Mr. Asquith is by his gifts and limitations better adapted than to work before a jury. He never much cared for jury work, and although he appeared in *nisi prius* cases (for instance, he was with Sir Charles Russell in the

notorious *baccarat* case), he preferred briefs in appellate actions. His style of speaking was clear and concise. It avoided heroics and repetition. *Nisi prius*, however, is a kind of work which requires a great deal of repetition as well as gesture. A jury have to have a fact dinned into their ears before they can grasp it. They have to be moved, and it may be necessary, if the case is to be won, to appeal to emotion rather than reason. Mr. Asquith, however, is impatient of rhetorical fustian. So also are the appellate tribunals. For this reason he was welcomed when he appeared before them, and his quiet concise manner influenced them as voluble advocacy could not have done. His language was never forced. That was not necessary. He had a natural feeling for beautiful English, and this showed itself as to-day it shows itself in his political speeches.

His special experience of railway litigation brought him also before the Railway Commissioners, and he was quickly building up a practice of a highly lucrative kind before this court as well as in the appellate tribunals when, as is stated elsewhere, Mr. Gladstone surprised the country, though not Mr. Asquith's friends, by offering the Home Secretaryship to the young Q.C.

An interval of three years now followed. But in July, 1895, the Liberals again found themselves in opposition. A good deal of curiosity was now felt as to the future of Mr. Asquith. He was known to be neither qualified for nor desirous of a political pension. On the one hand, he had not held office for the necessary four years; on the other, he had much too great a natural independence, and had been much too successful when at the Bar, not to hesitate before determining never

again to return there for his livelihood. During the early autumn many eyes were upon him. Some critics said that if he went back he would ignore a tradition. Hitherto no barrister who, from practising before the Privy Council, had afterwards been elevated to a seat upon it and to high Ministerial position, had been known on quitting office to return to practice. It was suggested that not only was there no precedent for doing this, but that the tradition ought to be preserved in view of the possibility that at any moment the Privy Councillor appearing before the tribunal might be constituted a member of its Judicial Committee.

Mr. Asquith, however, has never been afraid to open a door simply because there are cobwebs upon it. He felt he had a right to earn his living in his own way, and the feeling was entirely honourable, not only to his character but to his common sense. Those who watched were not kept long in suspense. In October it was known that he had accepted a brief for the Union Bank in the action brought against it by Mrs. Langtry for the loss of her jewels. Not only so, but he resumed his old practice before the Privy Council. He had taken the step some had questioned he would have the courage to take. He was the first Privy Councillor to appear before the Privy Council.

In this action he showed some of his well-known characteristics ; self-reliance, tenacity, directness, appear as they appeared before, and though there may seem an unwonted element of dash in his treatment of tradition, what he did was neither hasty nor ill-considered. He never doubted that he would succeed. The splendid discretion which has always been shown in his actions

did not desert him at this time. He did not lightly establish the precedent. It was probably long in contemplation. What he did, he did because he could find no reason to forbid him. His mind has always been admirably direct.

And it is worthy of note that though he was the first to take the step he then took, he has not been the last. Since then Mr. Haldane has followed his example; while more recently Sir Edward Carson, a member of the last Tory Government and a Privy Councillor also, as soon as he was released from office went straight back to the Bar, there to enjoy as great a practice as ever he had.

The action of Mr. Asquith was justified from the very first. His practice was now a very lucrative one. Yet it might have been much more extensive, and as a consequence more lucrative, if it had not suffered one distraction. The distraction was politics. Others have proved their devotion to party by protestations and by running risks of unpopularity. Mr. Asquith proved his in hard cash. Many a heavy country brief has he declined in the fear that he might not be able to return to London in time for a political engagement. Just before becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer he was offered a fee of ten thousand guineas to argue a case in Egypt. He declined it.

He has never hesitated between Liberalism and the Bar. He has always been a Liberal first and a lawyer afterwards. And though he was willing to let his legal work in the country suffer for the sake of his political work in London, he never let his legal work in London interfere with his political work in the country. When

in 1903 Mr. Chamberlain startled the country with his invitation to abandon Free Trade, Mr. Asquith, as another chapter tells, followed him everywhere exposing the fallacy of the hopes which were based upon Tariff Reform. Mr. Asquith almost dogged the footsteps of his opponent.

That he continued to practise in London during the campaign in the country is an indication of his physical strength no less than of his strength of purpose. He has never broken down.

Mr. Asquith has always been a very quick worker. This does not make it necessary for him to rise at curiously early hours in the morning. It was his alertness which has most impressed one at least of his contemporaries at Oxford, and this alertness had saved him much weary study, during his years at the Bar no less than during those at the University.

In his relations with the solicitors who briefed him, he was always most considerate. He seldom altered a document until he knew why the statement he wished to correct had been made. In consultation he listened intently, and was always open to conviction. What particularly impressed those who witnessed his work was the conscientiousness which he brought to bear upon every detail. He was always true to himself. Wise and firm and unemotional, he was, in the appellate tribunals, an admirable advocate. No part of his career is more honourable to him than that part which includes his years at the Bar. "For thirty years," said Sir Edward Clarke when the Bar celebrated the elevation of one of its members to the Premiership, "he has preserved an untarnished shield."

CHAPTER IV

PARLIAMENT

A CONSIDERABLE crowd was gathered in a room to listen to the address of a political candidate. The candidate bore an honoured name, the name of the greatest figure in the party. Before him the crowd stood close. They were there to hear the son of their leader, Herbert Gladstone, then making his entry into politics. Standing in the throng listening but unobserved was a shortish young man with a strong clean-shaven mouth and slight side whiskers. A commonplace enough young man he seemed. None regarded him. Their minds were upon the brilliant young son of their old and trusted leader; and perhaps only one member of the crowd had any intuition that the future would see the candidate follow this strong man and acknowledge him as the head of the party. For in those days Mr. Asquith passed to and fro almost unobserved.

But his interest in politics was intense, as indeed it had been from early Oxford days. His speaking at the Union had not been the mere academic exercises of a student of political history. He had spoken because he had felt. It has been recalled that his last speech at the Union was on Disestablishment. The principles of Liberalism were, to him, vital. When he had gone to the Bar he had continued his

interest, and when the Eighty Club was formed to celebrate the great Liberal victory of 1880, he was one of its first members. The quality of his speeches as a member of the club was quickly recognised. As has been said, Mr. Chamberlain, who had a keen eye for ability, was much interested in the young man.

It was not long before he received the offer of a seat. But, as usual, he was in no hurry. He was quite conscious of his strength. He knew that he would have other opportunities. He refused the offer, and waited. Presently another offer came to him. Again he declined it. He was still not ready. Then came other offers, and at length one from the constituency of East Fife. He considered this as he had considered the others, and then calmly accepted it. Strong pressure had long been brought to bear upon him to stand; but only now would he yield. East Fife was the seventeenth offer he had had.

The circumstances under which the election was fought were peculiar. His opponent, Mr. J. Boyd-Kinnear, had, like himself, been, during the past five years, a supporter of the Liberal programme, and had been returned as a supporter of Mr. Gladstone in the 1885 election. Mr. Boyd-Kinnear, however, had found himself unable to swallow his leader's Home Rule policy, and was now standing as a Unionist. At this time Mr. Asquith's support of Home Rule and of the Radical programme was of the most uncompromising description. So far as it was possible for a non-parliamentary figure to be known in political circles, he was already known. Scottish Liberals accepted him readily, and the foundations of a

popularity which has endured throughout the whole of his career in the House of Commons were laid. When the election took place he was returned at the head of the poll, the figures being :—

H. H. Asquith . . 2,863

J. Boyd-Kinnear . 2,489

Liberal majority 374

The circumstances under which he entered the House of Commons were not perhaps calculated to inspire Liberal leaders who had served the party for many years and who now saw their opponents filling the Government benches. But there is no doubt that these are exactly the conditions most likely to contribute to the rapid rise of the young and unknown politician who possesses genuine ability. It was under such circumstances that Lord Randolph Churchill came to the front in the 'eighty Parliament and that Mr. Lloyd George achieved his great reputation in the Parliaments of 1895 and 1900. The weaker his side the better for the new man—if he is really able. To make an impression in this way the qualities required are resource, devotion, alertness—above all, pertinacity. The young man must always be on the look-out for an opportunity of effective intervention. The good use of frequent opportunities then begins to attract attention from the occasion to the person, and leaders, as well as public commentators, begin to observe the brilliant ability of the new private member. However able a politician be, he has less hope of impressing upon his chiefs the usefulness of his services if these

are given only at intervals. None but the supreme figures can afford to adopt a policy of reticence. We only allow ourselves to be wooed by the new cocoa when we have read the advertisement twenty-one times, and we must read twenty-one times more before we are won.

Yet, as perhaps was to be expected from his actions at the Bar, it was this policy of reticence which, when he entered Parliament, he continued to pursue. He accepted the risk, as when he had rejected his first criminal brief he had accepted the risk of having to do without a practice. He had never diffused his quality, and he was not going to do it now. At the Union he had taken care that a speech from him was an event. He was determined that the same should be said of his speeches in the House.¹ It was during this, the first year of his appearance at Westminster, that his remarkable defence of Mr. Cunningham Graham was in the mind of all London, and interest in him was not unnaturally excited in the minds of members of the House of Commons. Indeed, throughout his first Parliament his greatest celebrity was gained beyond the doors of St. Stephen's; during these first five years members thought of him more as the advocate of Radicalism in the courts than on the floor of the House of Commons. The part he took in the Parnell Commission, obviously a case of supreme interest to his fellow members of whatever side in politics, gave him greatly increased prominence, and made his rising from the back bench on which he sat a matter of

¹ "He took care that his speaking should be an event."—*Saturday Review*, 1895.

considerable interest. The question before the country was still that of Ireland. Ireland was now on her trial in the courts. And one of her advocates was the member for East Fife.

But while he was not unconscious of the interest he excited, he was not in any hurry to acquire such a reputation as is sought for by most young politicians. He moved slowly; he felt his way. He nursed his reputation indeed so carefully that it became a cause of complaint in the widening circle which appreciated his oratory. Soon he had a vogue. He piqued interest. Mr. Gladstone was supposed to have a special interest in him. He had been run by a set at Oxford; now the leaders of the party began to take him up.

"His party determined from the first to run him, and they ran him with a vengeance," says a critic, recalling the time.¹ "It took Disraeli ten years to gain the ear of the House," continues the same writer; "Mr. Asquith and Mr. Curzon got it from the moment they entered." But the most singular part of the business, as this critic goes on to point out, was that the Tories who suffered most for his attacks began to pay him the compliment of criticism. Moreover, with the criticism there was often mixed a note of friendliness and appreciation of the abilities of the new member which was remarkable alike for its warmth and for the character of its bestowers. Lord Salisbury and Mr. Balfour were strong in their praise, "while Sir Henry James was only too glad to claim the credit of having discovered the rising star. When one

¹ *Saturday Review*, 1895.

of the cleverest and best known women in London society accepted Mr. Asquith, who had now become a widower, this favourite of fortune shot suddenly into the very bull's-eye of fashion and power."

The marriage referred to did not take place until after the Liberal party was in power. But it may be convenient to refer here to the event. Miss Margot Tennant was the daughter of the late Sir Charles Tennant, and a lady not only of personality, but of acknowledged charm. She had lived in a world quite different from that inhabited by the middle-class young man now making so great a reputation in Parliament. She was supposed to love the gaieties of life. She was high-spirited and perhaps a little difficult of comprehension. She had the unusual quality, in a woman, of a sense of humour. Above all, she was quite distinct. Mr. Asquith met her, and ultimately what has proved a most happy marriage took place. Mr. Gladstone, who, allowing for the difference between his age and hers, was a close friend of the bride, attended the wedding, and Miss Dorothy Drew had a part in the ceremony.

Before this event, before the Liberal victory, Mr. Asquith was continuing to build up, with his considerable Bar practice, a name in the Commons. His appearances continued to be rare, though most useful to his party and to his own reputation. His most effective intervention was in a debate which arose out of the great trial in which he had so long and so successfully borne a part. Sir Richard Webster had spoken upon the forged letters. Mr. Asquith in a very emphatic way replied. "From this moment," says Mr. Stead, "his Parliamentary reputation was made."

Mr. Asquith, if asked, would probably, however, decline to support this way of putting a fact. It was rather his policy to build up his name slowly. But the incident was no doubt the crowning stone in the building of his reputation as a private member. Recognition was now near.

What that recognition would be none cared to hazard. Doubtless the common idea was that he would get an under-secretaryship. But it was assumed that his special gifts would be given scope. In June, 1892, the end came. And when the Liberal leader had to select someone to move a vote of censure on the defeated Government, it was considered significant that the man he chose for this important work was the member for East Fife.

The circumstances under which Mr. Asquith spoke were made somewhat difficult for him by those who preceded and those who followed his rising. It is curious that at the time he was associated in the public mind with Ireland. His first two speeches in the House had been on Irish subjects, his greatest success was gained in an Irish debate, his reputation at the Bar and in the country rested largely upon his work in an Irish *cause célèbre*, and his speeches upon the platform were marked by a particularly close examination of Irish affairs. In some of his addresses, however, he had referred to future party policy, and in January, 1890, he had rightly used the freedom allowed to a private member to demand from the Liberal leader an outline of what the proposed Home Rule Bill was to be.

These demands were referred to by the mover and seconder of the Address to the Throne on the occasion

of the prorogation of Parliament in August, 1892, and he was twitted on the fact that no answer had yet been given to his demand. When he got up to move his amendment to the Address—an amendment which was, of course, intended to effect the inevitable change of Government—he made no pretence to explain away his words. He does not explain. He admitted the use of the words, and then turned to criticise the retiring Administration.

It is significant that, incidentally, he paid those compliments to the mover and seconder which are usually paid by a Front Bench man. It is important, too, to note that when he was succeeded by the retiring Chancellor of the Exchequer, the latter assumed towards him, not the kindly and slightly patronising air which a member of a Government is apt to adopt towards a young back-bench politician, but the manner of one facing an opponent against whom it is necessary to be on one's guard. The Chancellor claimed that as Mr. Gladstone had not yet stated, in specific terms, what his Home Rule measure was to be, Mr. Asquith had no recourse but to vote against his own amendment. It was an encounter between two leaders, and the fact that one sat upon a back bench only emphasised the more the position which, by a few speeches, he had in the six years now brought to a close attained for himself.

CHAPTER V

HOME SECRETARY

ON June 28th, 1892, Lord Salisbury's Parliament was dissolved, and from July 1st to 26th the country again suffered the turbulence of a general election. Though the whole Newcastle programme was made the subject of strenuous party argument, the shadow of Home Rule was over all. From every Conservative platform a serious warning was given against the folly of yielding the Irish demand. "Separationist"—a term now become the ultimate in opprobrious epithet—was flung at whoever carried the Liberal colour or spoke by the Liberal book. Appeals were thrown out wholesale, and not only to party spirit, but to patriotism. Old leaders and new—old leaders in new places, and new ones in old—travelled the country and called for justice on the one hand, and defence of the Union on the other.

But overshadowing every other was the heroic figure of the old leader fighting, as doubtless he already guessed, his last political battle. The election meant more to him than it could mean to any other. For others opportunities might come again. This was his last appeal to the people in the wisdom of whose final decisions he had always trusted.



MR. ASQUITH WHEN HOME SECRETARY.

When the election was over the final result was seen to be:

Gladstonians and Nationalists .	355
Unionists	315
	<hr/>
Majority	40

“Mr. Gladstone,” says Mr. Lucy,¹ “was staying at Dalmeny when he received a telegram announcing the issue of the last doubtful contest in the general election. The little group gathered in the library was not ungovernably enthusiastic at the aggregate results. One, gallantly putting the best face on it, said, ‘Well, we shall have a majority of forty.’”

“‘Too small, too small,’ said Mr. Gladstone, slowly shaking his head and speaking in those deep, tragic tones he reserved for occasions of greatest storm and stress.”

Too small it was. Yet it was perhaps the greatest personal triumph that had ever come to one who had tasted many such. For it was a triumph wrested from a country still in its heart opposed to the measure for which he had staked all.

Ancient Liberals, who had held out in 1886, now yielded once again to the magic of their old leader and came again to give him their allegiance. But some still held back, and with such a majority the party could be expected to be dogged rather than hopeful.

When the House reassembled, a vote of no confidence in the Tory Administration was at once passed, and Lord Salisbury resigned. Then the country turned to the agreeable relaxation of Cabinet-making, while the

¹ “Diary of the Home Rule Parliament.”

"Old Parliamentary Hand" set itself once more to a now accustomed task. Certain appointments were presumed. Sir William Harcourt, Lord Rosebery, Lord Kimberley, and Sir George Trevelyan, members of earlier Cabinets, seemed certain of inclusion. There were other names also which were felt to be inevitable. But when at last the list appeared, and the public read that the new Home Secretary was to be Mr. Asquith, hitherto known to it chiefly by his work in the courts, it was not unnaturally surprised.

That the Prime Minister was determined upon the introduction of new blood had been understood, but he had not found that new blood in the anticipated quarters. There was more than one notable omission, and that of more than one statesman who had deserved the honours of his party. But, as it was pointed out on Mr. Gladstone's behalf, he could not include everybody, and seventeen is too many. There were not wanting informed persons who could account for the absence of some names, and accordingly for some of the consequent inclusions. But while many of the new appointments were to be accounted for, the elevation of Mr. Asquith puzzled everybody. It was not that there was anything against him; but it was felt that he had not been tried. "That he is a smart man, almost a drefle smart man, is unquestioned," observed that mentor of Liberal politicians, Mr. W. T. Stead; "but his promotion is very audacious."

In the House of Commons there was less surprise. Mr. Asquith had already enjoyed two small debating triumphs; he had made a name at the Bar by his work on the Parnell Commission; and Mr. Gladstone was

known to have had his eye upon him. But even the Commons, though prepared to witness his elevation, were surprised at the splendour of it when it came. Young statesmen are usually permitted to shed their youthful elegancies and indiscretions in the innocent obscurity of under-secretaryship. Yet here was a man of unproved capacity being pitchforked into one of the highest positions in the State !

Against this it was to be said that Mr. Asquith had neither elegancies nor indiscretions to shed ; that his capacity had already been proved to those best qualified to judge, and that a daring innovation of this kind is often a good thing for the country.

Mr. Gladstone, nevertheless, had not originally contemplated putting him into the Cabinet. It is not generally known that the credit of the appointment is really due to Mr. Morley. Mr. Gladstone's idea was that Mr. Asquith, as a tribute to his work on the Parnell Commission, should be made Solicitor-General. Moreover, Mr. Asquith himself understood that such was to be his appointment, and was making arrangements accordingly. Mr. Morley intervened, however, and pointed out that the young Liberal barrister was fitted for a far higher office than the Solicitor-Generalship. Upon this Mr. Gladstone at once put Mr. Asquith into the Cabinet.

That the country as a whole did not yet know the new Home Secretary was not cause for wonder. But its ignorance was not long to continue. Mr. Asquith came to a Department which gave him great scope. The Home Office had lately been in the hands of men not intimately in touch with the democracy. The bond of union which ought to exist between the people of the

country and the Department specially deputed to serve its interests was non-existent.

From the first Mr. Asquith was determined to be a reformer. He spared neither himself nor any other. He began to develop a will of iron. Indeed, there was a story told by one who fourteen years ago summed up the Home Secretary as he then was¹ to the effect that he was supposed to cherish the ambition of being a strong man, and that on one occasion a friend was driven to remonstrate. "You are quite right to be firm," the friend said, "but need you *look* so very firm?"

Office at once created a change in Mr. Asquith's Parliamentary manner, and the same critic who has been quoted had occasion to remark upon the difference between the earlier speeches, which had wanted freshness and had lacked signs of original thinking, and the strength and freshness of his Front Bench address and exposition of Parliamentary measures. "He got up his Bills as a lawyer got up his case."

But while this may be taken for praise, it is the kind of praise of which a politician needs to be suspicious. Englishmen do not like the lawyer's attitude in their statesmen. They look askance at a political intelligence which is detached. It cannot, however, be charged against Mr. Asquith that he showed any important indications of such detachment—as some would be inclined to call it, political deficiency. But though he was a Home Ruler and Radical who always spoke with a quite obvious conviction, there are, nevertheless, some curiously lawyer-like touches scattered about his speeches.

¹ *New Review*, 1894.

Mr. Asquith quickly got a grasp of the duties of his office. "In six months," the same critic and admirer said, "he had convinced the staff of the Department that a vigorous mind and a character of singular directness were at work upon it."

At last he had arrived in a position where he could feel that the promise held before his eyes as a schoolboy of the London streets was being realised, when all the husbandry of resources which he had laid upon himself in the past was yielding full fruit. Hitherto he had been working that he might be allowed to show his quality; now to show his quality was not only his desire, but his duty. He felt power tingling in his fingers; he saw a great field opened out around him only waiting for his labour. He rolled up his sleeves.

It was unfortunate for him that almost within a year of his assuming office an incident occurred which for a time seriously prejudiced his popularity. For some years afterwards the mention of "Featherstone" at a meeting at which he was present was supposed to be a taunt of the most unmerciful kind.

This Featherstone incident arose in the course of a miners' strike in the neighbourhood of Doncaster, Yorkshire. Featherstone is a village in the district. For some time there had been ill-feeling between the miners and the mine authorities. This reached a climax on the 24th of September, 1893, when some men who had been engaged in sinking a shaft objected to the manager offering smudge for sale. The manager undertook to refrain. But the crowd still appeared dissatisfied. Presently, however, they went away, but returned the following morning with a more threatening demeanour.

This time they carried sticks. The manager, alarmed, asked for police assistance. But the Doncaster police were engaged in keeping order at the races. Finally an appeal was made for the military. When the latter arrived a riot took place, in which two men were killed.

The affair at once aroused the greatest indignation among the working classes throughout the country. It was said that foreign methods were being introduced into industrial disputes, and a loud and insistent demand was made for an immediate explanation from the Home Office. Unfortunately for all concerned, this way of approaching him was the very best that could have been followed for creating a breach between the working classes on the one hand and a man of the Asquith type on the other. He could not be influenced by popular clamour; he was even inclined to examine such a demand with some suspicion of its justice. But he was quite determined that its justice should be examined. He appointed a commission to inquire into the question of the firing, and in the meantime had no objection to hear the matter mentioned at his meetings. "Say something about Featherstone," someone called out at Glasgow. "I am going to say something about Featherstone," he answered with a little snap. And without more ado he asseverated his intention, so long as he was responsible for maintaining law and order, of seeing that law and order prevailed. His attitude, it must be admitted, seemed to many an unsympathetic one. But to denounce him as some of the supporters of labour did was the worst way by which to try to excite his sympathy. A strong nature, while it asks no

sympathy for itself, will often give it—but not in exchange for threats. The Featherstone affair ought really not to be recalled with any memory of Mr. Asquith's relations with labour, but be regarded rather as an incident in his police administration. For it may be said—and said not lightly, but with a full sense of responsibility—that there is no public man who has ever filled office in the State who has thought more or done more for labour. From the very first moment of his entering the Home Office, he regarded the industrial classes as his special care.

He came to his first official task with no pre-conceptions. He was determined to examine the resources of the Home Department, and to set in motion whatever machinery existed for improving the condition of the working classes whose administrative guardian he recognised himself to be. But he quickly discovered that the machinery was inadequate. And thus came about the elaborate reform of factory law which was to mark his tenure at the Home Office.

His first action had been to appoint a number of Departmental Commissions. The utility of these inquiries was not long in doubt. One of the first cares of the Home Secretary was the improvement of the lot of the lead workers. It was a case that cried for treatment, and he tolerated no cynical defence of any existing system. Lead workers to-day have good cause to remember the man who in 1892 was put into that Home Office, which, as Mr. Stead tells us, he made "the office of the Home."

Another trade which enjoyed the Home Secretary's attention was that of the Belfast linen workers. Acting

on the principle that everything should undergo personal examination, Mr. Asquith had gone very carefully into trade mortality figures. But when he had done so, he had found himself making what were not only personal discoveries, but discoveries for the Department. The mortality from consumption in Irish linen factories was greatly in excess of what, so far as could be seen, it ought to have been. The interest of the Home Secretary was at once aroused, and he despatched inspectors to Belfast with instructions to leave no stone unturned to discover the actual cause of the surprising death rate. When their reports were made it became clear that the terrible ravages of phthisis, which only mute statistics had called to light, were due to the steam and damp generated in the working rooms and breathed in by the workers. The cause, now that it was found, seemed a simple one, and the remedial method of better ventilation which at once suggested itself was also one of simplicity. But it is to Mr. Asquith that belongs the whole credit upon the Government side for this great and needed reform. Praise is due, however, to the employers for the fact that immediately representations were sent down of the desires of the Home Office, they, without waiting for the compulsion of a new law, made all the improvements demanded. The result was not long in showing itself. When later the Home Secretary again turned to the mortality figures of the Belfast linen trade, he saw that already they had gone down.

A third trade the conditions of which excited the unfavourable interest of the Home Secretary was that of the Sheffield grinders. Grindstones suspected of

being dangerous often broke and injured workers engaged in working at the time. Mr. Asquith found out that there was much carelessness displayed in the factories, and when he brought in his Bill he provided for the regular inspection of the stones. Moreover, he enacted that their further use was prohibited, either until put into proper condition, or, if incapable of that, for ever. Even a Home Secretary as vigilant as Mr. Asquith, however, could not keep personally in touch with the conditions obtaining in each individual factory throughout the kingdom. The only way by which this could be done was by deputy. At the time he had entered upon his work, the staff of factory inspectors was totally inadequate for the work they had to do. With this fact he was at once impressed, and he quickly ordered the addition of a large number of new men. He greatly increased also the centres of inspection. In fact, he sought to make the Home Office a living force for good in the factory world—a force in which every inspector was a unit. It was to be an engine of reform, a light in dark corners. It was to spare none who deserved its censure, and to pass by none who deserved its help. It was to be ever pulsating with life, but it was to have an energy which never diffused itself. The inspectors were to know, and soon in fact came to know, that the Home Office had a great ideal, and that the realization of part of that ideal was their potential contribution. Mr. Asquith made the office a curiously accurate reflection of his own mind.

In proper sanitation he recognised the greatest of all blessings for workers, and his insistence upon a high standard of sanitary excellence is not uncharacteristic

of his general method of reform. The maintenance of such a standard was highly necessary, but to insist upon it was not to do anything sensational. To raise wages or reduce hours of labour, on the other hand, would be to attract immediate attention. He has always shown an ambition to be an effective rather than a conspicuous reformer, and it was therefore upon these necessary, but not extraordinary, reformations that he first concentrated his efforts.

There has perhaps been an inclination to deny Mr. Asquith the possession of ideals. His political career has seemed to some who have not looked very closely the career of one whose reforming zeal is checked by a too complete sanity of outlook. This is probably true. His caution indeed sometimes strains the allegiance of his followers. But that caution is not concerned first of all to protect himself. Discretion in all things is the lesson he has carried through life since the days he learnt it under Jowett. Discretion, however, may be an impersonal quality speaking for the interests of the State, and forgetting the personal interest, often even speaking against personal desire. A man may hesitate to advance rashly in a misty hill country, not because by falling he may endanger his reputation as a climber, but because something more important—his life—may be at stake. If “political” is substituted for “climbing” reputation, and “life” for “interests of the country,” some understanding may be arrived at of the mental position of a statesman of the Asquith type. But it is absurd to deny him ideals. He may not run towards them; he may feel his way thither. But he does not stand still.

At the Home Office he certainly had a high ideal of efficiency. That he kept ever before him. But, while he held such an ideal, it was not that only which inspired his reforms. As has been before observed, he felt himself to be the official guardian of the labouring classes. But he was inspired, too, by a nobler feeling than this. Mr. Asquith is a man of firm exterior, and because of his defence of the magistrate's action at Featherstone, and of his refusal to liberate the Irish political prisoners, he has never shaken off a reputation for hardness. But his heart is really one of great humanity. The sufferings endured by workers which even his first few months at the Home Office revealed to him were to him intolerable. If he was a hard man, his hardness came out more often in his relentless campaign against recalcitrant factory owners than in indifference to the lot of their employees.

The humanity of his outlook, however, was exhibited scarcely more perhaps in the sphere of factory-life amelioration than in that of prison reform. There is probably no Department of the State where intelligence and sympathy is more called for than in that which controls the national penitentiaries. A man's attitude towards a prisoner is a pretty good test of the existence in him or not of what are practically all the really important qualities of heart and mind, and the old Puritan's "There but for the grace of God go I," is a more intelligent as well as a more charitable review of the whole circumstances of crime than half the verdicts of the courts. Mr. Asquith has never by his greatest enemy been accused of cant, and he believed that in prison administration there was a place for mercy.

But the natural discretion of the man kept him from sudden changes. He had no patience with the type of mind which protests that things are very well as they are. But he was determined to feel his way to reform. Discretion is the better part of valour. It would be perhaps a politician's motto that a commission is the better part of change. Commissions, however, if their deliberations can be accelerated either by public opinion or Government pressure, may be useful. And so Mr. Asquith believed. Much information he could only hope to obtain by means of this somewhat cumbrous machine. It would doubtless have been congenial to the more direct and energetic side of his temperament to have been able to deal, as he had dealt with the linen factories, at first hand. But wisdom required knowledge before giving a consent to move, and, as has been shown, Mr. Asquith has always been governed by his wisest instincts.

The appointment of the Prison Commission, however, had been one of the later conceptions of his term of office, and before legislation could follow upon his conclusions he was in Opposition. Even without the aid of new enactments he had still been able to do a great deal to humanise the prison system already in existence. He was a strong opponent of long sentences. He believed they were degrading, and that they served no useful purpose. He was also strongly in favour of the classification of criminals, and of a special treatment for first offenders. This last most needed reform has since been made law by Mr. Balfour's Government.

But though Mr. Asquith was a believer in clemency, on two occasions he was in danger of prejudicing his

reputation for that virtue. It may be convenient to deal with the incidents here.

The first of these had relation to the Irish political prisoners who ten years previously had been sentenced to penal servitude for life for the crime of treason-felony.

The case of these prisoners, commonly called the Dynamiters, was briefly this. One of them, named Whitehead, had a nitro-glycerine factory in Birmingham. Another of the gang, Gallagher, financed him. Gallagher went up and down between Birmingham and London and ultimately, through other men, conveyed quantities of nitro-glycerine to London in trunks. Some of the explosive he concealed in fishing stockings. When arrested he was found carrying £1,000 and an order for admission to the House of Commons. A second couple were the men Featherstone and Dalton, who made explosives in Glasgow and Cork. Two other men, Burton and Cunningham, left infernal machines in railway cloak-rooms. But the man around whose name the amnesty agitation raged was Daly. Daly came over from America in October, 1883. He was without occupation. He lived with another of the gang named Egan. Although Daly did nothing to earn a livelihood, yet he always seemed to have money and made journeys between Birmingham and Liverpool. On his last journey before arrest he eluded the police by walking from Birmingham to Wolverhampton and there taking the train to Liverpool. He was lost sight of for three days, but was then arrested at Birkenhead railway station, when three infernal machines were found upon him. At the trial the men were convicted of treason-felony and sentenced to

penal servitude for life. The Irish party, however, claimed that they should have been prosecuted under the Explosives Act, a new Act under which the greatest penalty was fourteen years. They said it was under this Act that the men who had been arrested at Walsall for harbouring explosives had been convicted. They charged the Government with once more differentiating between Englishmen and Irishmen. They went on demanding an amnesty, and on February 9th, 1893, Mr. Redmond moved an amendment to the Address to call attention to the matter.

Mr. Asquith's reply lacked nothing of conviction. He began by saying very emphatically that any suggestion that a bargain upon the subject had been struck between the Irish and the Liberal party just before the Liberals came into office was not founded on fact. Mr. Gladstone had specifically stated that their cases would be treated like all other cases. "I have to say in the most express and emphatic terms that so far as this question of amnesty of prisoners is concerned there is no understanding, there is no undertaking, there is no agreement."

As to the sentences—if he had any doubt of the justice he would have acted on it. But he had none. Then he turned to the cases of the men and asked why so much was heard of Daly and so little of the others. He went over the facts and divided the prisoners into groups. First, there was the Birmingham group. Then there was the Cork and Glasgow group. Thirdly, there was the cloak-room group. Were these innocent or guilty? How was it that nothing was said about their cases? He recalled the facts about Daly. He explained

why he had released two prisoners, Egan and another, and protested against the suggestion that the men remaining in prison were to be treated as political refugees. Then he gave his decision, which he said was final:

“For my part, this is the last word I will say in the House on the subject. I say it both with reference to the past and, if need be, with reference to the future. Persons who resort to this mode of warfare against society, who use terror as their instrument, who proceed in their methods with reckless disregard of the life and safety of the weak, the innocent and helpless, are persons who deserve and will receive no consideration or indulgence from any British Government.”

The second incident in his prison administration which excited criticism was his refusal to release Mrs. Maybrick. The latter, it may be remembered, had been convicted at Liverpool after an historic trial. When sentence had been pronounced a question had arisen as to the correctness of the verdict, and the prisoner was respited and sent to penal servitude for life. It was admitted that someone, either the Judge or the Home Secretary of the day, had blundered, that this sentence to penal servitude was wholly unjustifiable, that if guilty the prisoner had no excuse and should receive the full penalty, or that if on the other hand there existed a doubt of guilt, she ought to have got the benefit of it. It was possible that the Home Secretary who had been Mr. Asquith's predecessor, and who had been responsible for the error, had enough of the common weakness of humanity to believe that what he had once decided could not be wrong. But it was

hoped that the new Secretary, a man who had almost immediately established a reputation for directness, and who had shown his independence of officialism, would bring to the matter an unprejudiced mind.

This, of course, Mr. Asquith did. But he brought also his discretion. The occasion, however, was one where discretion might have submitted itself completely to mercy. Mr. Asquith saw otherwise, examined the case, and refused the prisoner's release.

These incidents are the only ones in Mr. Asquith's *régime* as prison administrator which have ever aroused criticism. They are not insignificant incidents; but even in these he showed himself as a man determined to be independent of everyone but himself. He was still the cold, wise, determined man who went on steadily towards the same goal.

As a relief to Mr. Asquith's treatment of one woman charged with murder is to be set his general attitude towards a very different type—that of the woman who seeks to crush the life out of the evidence of her shame. It is to Mr. Asquith's credit, as has been pointed out,¹ that he has always advocated a treatment for these women different from all others who kill. To that last fatuity of English criminal court practice, the horrible farce of inflicting publicly a sentence which the whole court knows will never be carried out—as also to the gross cruelty and injustice of long terms of imprisonment in such cases—he has always been opposed. Three years was the limit he usually permitted, but when it could be arranged that the prisoner should go to friends he often ordered an immediate release.

¹ *Review of Reviews*, 1895.

Having dealt with Mr. Asquith's work as an administrator of factories and prisons, it is necessary to review the work of the Home Secretary as such in the sphere of legislation. The most important of all his legislative efforts was of course the Disestablishment Bill which he introduced in 1894, and again in the following year. But the chief measures which came from him in his capacity of Home Secretary were the Employers' Liability and Workshop and Factory Bills.

The Employers' Liability Bill was one of the leading proposals of the 1893 session, and was only overshadowed by Home Rule. Its second reading was moved by Mr. Asquith on February 23rd. By it a master became liable for every accident to his men if caused by carelessness either on his own part or on that of any official or fellow-servant, due allowance being made if the injured person could be convicted of negligence.

Mr. Chamberlain, at this time in the transition stage of his conversion from Radicalism to Conservatism, proposed a drastic amendment in favour of compensation for *all* accidents, but this, as Mr. Asquith pointed out, would mean compensation by means of industrial insurance. Slowly the Bill proceeded through its courses. For two sessions it dangled on, till at last it was approved of and sent to the Lords, who fastened on the contracting-out clause, and a part of the Bill already much discussed was threshed out anew. Finally the Lords decided upon an amendment by which masters and men who entered into a contracting-out agreement at the time of hiring might be free from the rigour of the Bill. Naturally this would have meant

that masters would not employ men who would not agree to these terms. Masters would thus have been as before.

The Bill returned to the Commons with the aggressive amendment included. Mr. Asquith met it promptly. The Bill was nugatory. "Are we"—he cried vehemently—"are we in this House going to accept at the dictation of another place a proposal which even a Tory candidate appealing to an industrial constituency in Lancashire does not venture to support? We are not. We regard this amendment as fatal to the Bill, and we ask the House to disagree with the Lords' amendment."

The Government having placed on record this refusal to withdraw the contracting-out form, had now no resource but to drop the Bill.

The man chiefly affected took the rebuff with dignity. He could scarcely have been surprised. Moderate though he was supposed to be, the peers were not likely to make any particular effort to meet him. Had he not already said that he would end them? Had he not found the only thing to regret in the Home Rule Bill of 1886 that it recognised the principle of a second chamber? No Liberal could expect to pass any measure at this time. But Mr. Asquith did not waste himself. If he had failed to pass his Bill, he had added enormously to his reputation. He had been taught to go round if he could not get over. He could not help the workman with a Liability Act. He turned to factory legislation.

Mr. Asquith's second important legislative effort on behalf of the workers was the Factory Bill which he introduced on March 1st, 1895, only a few months

before he was to turn from the not always fruitful fields of Government enactment to the certainly arid plains of Opposition. One of those who brought in the Bill, it is worthy of note, was his Liberal successor in the Department, Mr. Herbert Gladstone.

The new Bill extended the jurisdiction of the Home Office over factories and workshops, and included for the first time laundries, bakehouses, docks, wharves, quays, etc., building operations and machinery in tenement factories. A minimum of air space was rigidly fixed and the protection of workmen against accident made compulsory. Exits in case of fire were insisted on; dangerous machinery was to be more frequently inspected; employers were made responsible for out-work done under insanitary conditions; overtime for persons under eighteen was forbidden; and the cleaning of machinery by children prohibited. Besides all this, every factory was to be registered.

Mr. Asquith was keenly desirous to pass the Bill, and for that reason he sought to make it non-contentious. Accordingly he avoided a drastic attempt to raise the age for child labour. In every way his proposals were moderate, and as such they met with acclamation. "The Bill," says Mr. Lucy, "was received with almost alarming unanimity of approval. Such high authorities as Sir John Gorst, Sir Henry James, Mr. Matthews, Mr. Mundella, regarding the proposals from different points of view, agreed in generally commending them."¹ The second and third readings passed triumphantly, and after being referred to the Standing Committee on Trade, the measure finally became law.

¹ "Diary of the Home Rule Parliament."

This is the only important Bill which Mr. Asquith carried, but it is also almost the only important Act passed in three years by the Government of which he was a member. It was a victory for discretion. It was a victory for one of the great principles of his politics. Perhaps it was a victory for Jowett.

It did not please everybody. It was considered, as it indeed was, too mild. The age limit was not low enough. People with more experience of the actual conditions of child labour could have said more than did the Home Secretary. But it was a Bill which was the outcome of a genuine sympathy. To carry such a Bill at all it had to be non-contentious. It represented an advance, if only to one new milestone along the road of progress. In the present age of political motor cars this pedestrian movement would quite fail to satisfy the urgent Socialist chauffeur who would want to pass many milestones between sunrise and sunset. But whether or not, now or then, the pace was quick enough to please everybody, the Home Secretary nevertheless by what he did earned the undying thanks of thousands of helpless women and unprotected children, and showed himself at once the friend of humanity and the enemy of squalor and disease.

CHAPTER VI

DISESTABLISHMENT

It is possible that to the intelligent inquirer of posterity the present age will be remarkable as much as in any other way for the practice of apparent inconsistencies. And perhaps none of these will appeal more to his sense of wonder than the circumstance that the various branches of a religion which claimed for its Head One who called Himself the Prince of Peace should have spent much of the time available for other purposes in loading one another with bitter reproach.

For many years such a feeling of bitterness had existed between the supporters of the English Church in Wales on the one hand and the members of the various Nonconformist Churches on the other. The former represented a small minority of religious worshippers, the latter a great majority. The proportion has indeed been stated by Mr. Lloyd George to be as follows: "The Nonconformists are represented by three-fourths of the population, the Church of England by one-eighth, and the rest are *bonâ fide* travellers."

In spite of this disproportion, however, this Church of a minority was in Wales still designated the National Church and still retained the various endowments which it had held before it had been divided. In this way the greater part of the people were unbenefited by the

income set aside years before for the spiritual welfare of the nation. This is the crux of Welsh Nonconformist grievances which culminated in the agitation for the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England in Wales, and in the appearance upon the Newcastle programme of a measure to carry out the Welsh demand. The agitation had not developed without much acerbity of speech upon both sides. This was, in the nature of things, to be expected. Upon the one hand were a number of men faced, not merely with the loss of temporal privileges, but with what they conceived to be the spectacle of the destruction of a great and living work. Fully aware that they were in a minority, they hoped and believed they would witness their Church re-establish itself in the people's affections. Many of these supporters of the Established Church were nevertheless keen Nationalists, with as intense a love for their country as that which abides in the heart of the Nonconformist patriot ; and to the best type of Nationalist belonged the leader of the Welsh Church party, the Bishop of St. Asaph.

But upon the other hand there was the Welsh dissenter. For many years he had been made to feel that his religion was an alien one. He expected not friendship, he received not tolerance. He contrasted the lives of the ministers of this would-be dominant Church, and he found that they were no better, and often worse, than those of the ministers of his own denomination. The local vicar assumed an ascendancy, social and religious, which to his Nonconformist parishioner was not a little galling. But he did more. He refused in many cases to acknowledge that the

ministrations of his dissenting brother had any validity or gave assurance of salvation. And to emphasise his attitude he refused Christian burial to persons of another communion than his own. It was the burial question which was at the bottom of half the agitations in Wales, and that was the means of sending Mr. Lloyd George to Parliament.

For years Wales had been demanding disestablishment, and declined to be put off. At the general election of 1892 thirty-one out of thirty-four members were returned definitely pledged to a Disestablishment Bill. It is, moreover, the curious fact that in three important constituencies the Tory candidate had promised to support such a measure. Nothing was of importance in Wales at this time but the Church question. Those who doubted this was so had only to read an article in a monthly review by the retiring Premier, Lord Salisbury, in which occurred the blunt statement that "it was obvious that the Welsh voted for Radical candidates, not from love of Home Rule, but from their aversion towards the Welsh Church." The nation was united. It asked for disestablishment, and without further delay. One of its representatives, it is true, accepted office in the Ministry, but there were still thirty members who would without compunction assist the defeat of the Liberals if they failed to bring in a Bill, and to bring it in soon. In the condition in which the Liberal party came back to power every threat was dangerous. The Irish could turn it out within ten minutes. But for practical purposes the Welsh group was just as threatening.

Mr. Gladstone intended a disestablishment measure to have a prominent place. With a majority of two hundred he would still have put forward a Bill in due course. But under the present circumstances, and in view of the demand of the Principality, it was deemed necessary to do something in the first session.

But before doing anything a minister had to be chosen to introduce the Government's proposal, and the minister appointed to the task was Mr. Asquith. For the work he had many qualifications. Disestablishment was a reform which had always interested him. It had been the subject of his last speech at Oxford. Since then he had appeared upon the platform with Nonconformist liberators and had urged the justice of giving Wales the one great boon for which she pleaded. In 1890, he and the Rev. Griffith Ellis, the well-known Calvinistic Methodist leader, who had been with the Asquiths at Balliol, appeared together at Leicester. With the need for the reform he had long been acquainted by means of information communicated to him by the Welsh Nonconformists themselves. He knew also the strength of the demand. He knew, and the whole Cabinet knew, that they would have to move at once. There was one difficulty. Home Rule filled the horizon of 1893; yet Wales must not be kept waiting. It was decided, therefore, to have recourse to the method employed in 1868, when the Irish Church was disestablished. A Suspensory Bill had been introduced, which laid it down that, pending the introduction of a disestablishment measure, all emoluments were to be held subject to the pleasure of Parliament.

Mr. Asquith in February 28th, 1893, brought in a

Suspensory Bill for Wales. The most interesting feature of the debate was the appearance in it of Lord Randolph Churchill, who seized the occasion to break a long silence.

The Suspensory Bill was of course merely by way of being a guarantee of good faith to Wales. Its passage was not a matter of vital importance. What was important was the Bill to be put forward in the session of 1894. Upon that Bill Mr. Asquith had concentrated his mind. Particularly did he want to get at the root facts of the foundation of the Church in Wales. His speech, when he did come to make it, was rich in historical reference, and only failed somewhat in the respect that he omitted to use the available proofs of the minority condition of the Welsh Church.

On the 26th of April, 1894, Mr. Asquith rose in a House the benches of which were packed with members, and the galleries with bishops and other interested auditors, and announced a "Bill for the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of England in Wales and Monmouthshire."

He began by pointing out that this Bill was the result of the almost unanimous demand of the Welsh people. The Church of England, he continued, represented what was only a minority. Bishops looked mild expostulation, Welshmen cheered. Imperturbably the hard strong speaker continued, with just here and there a faint sparkle to suggest the wit that was in him. Mr. Asquith's humour has always been of the dry kind.

"Perhaps I shall be over-sanguine if I assume that this Bill will pass into law during the present session."

This pleased the Tories, who laughed heartily. And

then the Home Secretary began to set forth what, in fact, this Bill was.

The Church of England would in future cease to be regarded as the Church of Wales.

Her patronage would be forfeited, and no Welsh bishop would in future be summoned to sit in the House of Lords.

Referring to the present ecclesiastical law in Wales, Mr. Asquith said they proposed that as law it should cease to exist. Ecclesiastical Courts would forfeit their powers and have no right of appeal to the Privy Council.

Then he turned to disendowment.

"I need hardly remind the House that the Church of England as a Church is not in point of law the owner of any property whatever."

"All ecclesiastical property in this country, whether in England or Wales, is an endowment of some particular benefice or office, though it is sometimes disguised from popular apprehension"—here a dry humour again manifests itself—"particularly, I think, by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners." He then outlined the Government plan. The value of Church property in Wales amounted to £279,000 per annum. In future this was to be applied to the benefit of the Principality as a whole.

To administer the funds three special Welsh commissioners would be appointed who would have the necessary borrowing powers, who would be subject to Parliament, and who would control the cathedrals. The representative body of the Church of England would be allowed to continue control of the churches. Burial

grounds and glebes would be vested in the local parish, borough or district council, and the tithe rent charge, the most important source of income, would be vested in the county council in which was situated the land on which the charge was made. Present incumbents would have a life interest in their livings. Finally, the funds placed at the disposal of the Welsh people would be spent on cottage hospitals, dispensaries, convalescent homes, the provision of trained nurses for the sick poor, public halls and institutes, labourers' dwellings, the promotion of education, and the advancement of any public purpose the cost of which was not covered by the rates. To many of these objects the early Church had itself devoted its best efforts.

"In conclusion," said Mr. Asquith, "we set free for purposes of great and lasting public benefit a property to which the Welsh people, and the Welsh people alone, have in our opinion a legitimate title."

Mr. Asquith sat down amidst a burst of Liberal cheers and the general approval of the Welsh party. The Church of England champion, in the person of Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, at once sprang to his feet. He did not pick his words. It was never his way. Paragraphists have called him "Black Michael," and his form of attack has always carried a something of the ominous. Disendowment in his opinion was equivalent to plunder and sacrilege. The State had no right to take away what it had never given.

Intense feeling was excited throughout the country by the Bill. *The Times* criticised Mr. Asquith by charging him with making no effort to be conciliatory,

and the defenders of the Church upon the platforms denounced disestablishment with admirable fervour.

But though the Bill was much talked about in the country, it lay dormant as far as the House of Commons was concerned throughout the session. It appeared again in the Queen's Speech read in the House in February, 1895. On February 28th it was brought in again by Mr. Asquith, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. James Bryce, and the Solicitor-General. From that date until the day of the second reading, Mr. Asquith found himself questioned almost daily upon points connected with the measure. His replies, in keeping with his whole conduct of the Bill, were urbane and informing. On March 21st he moved the second reading.

Mr. Asquith's speech, in moving the first reading of his 1894 Bill, had been admirably lucid as to his intentions. There could be no question that he meant to establish religious equality in Wales. But one thing he had not done. He had not brought out with sufficient emphasis the actual state of minority in which the Church of England stood in the Principality.

He had also omitted to emphasise, as he might have done, the national individuality of Wales.

These omissions he made right in his speech on the second reading.

He said he realised that the question was one of delicacy and gravity. "For my part," he affirmed, "I desire to avoid, as far as we can, the importation into this discussion of unnecessary heat."

After this gentle preface, he turned to argument. "I assert that the Welsh people are a nation," he said. He dwelt on the growth of Welsh Nonconformity. There

were a hundred dissenting congregations in Wales at the beginning of the eighteenth century and a thousand at the beginning of the nineteenth. As for the contemporary position, it was illustrated by the figures taken in the diocese of St. Asaph—145,000 people had voted for disestablishment and 86,000 against. Moreover, in Wales at the moment dissenting communicants numbered 381,000, and Church communicants 118,000. The corresponding figures for Sunday schools were: dissenting bodies, 515,000; Church, 145,000. Of the 4,000 chapels in the Principality, there was not one without its weekly service. In twenty-seven parishes in Anglesey, on the other hand, there was no clergyman.

After dealing with the objections which had been raised to the proposals since the preceding session, he went on, referring to the statement that each parish required a standing witness to religion: "But is it necessary that this standing witness should be an officer of the State as well as a minister of the Church? What—as is too often the case in Wales—what if his message is unheeded, if his church is empty, if his mission is futile? Not, be it observed, because of the apathy of indifference, not because the parishioners are torpid or perverse, but because they find satisfaction and stimulus for their religious wants in unconsecrated buildings and in the services of an unauthorised ministry. The people of Wales have shown in days gone by that they can and will provide for their own spiritual needs, and it is in the sincere belief that this measure will minister as well to the religious as to the social welfare of the Principality that I ask the House to affirm it to be both politic and just."

Sir Michael Hicks-Beach warmly denounced the Bill, as he had done before, while Mr. Herbert Roberts voiced the support of Wales, and when the division took place the figures were :

Ayes	.	.	.	304
Noes	.	.	.	260

Majority . 44

The Bill was considered in Committee on May 21st and June 20th, but before anything further was done Mr. Asquith had quitted the Home Department, the Liberals had gone out of office, and Wales had begun another long season of waiting for the reform for which she has so long called.

It is now possible to review Mr. Asquith's work for disestablishment, and it may be said at once that the sincerity of his efforts is without question. He undoubtedly exhibited a sense of the difference between religious intensity on the one hand and vague latitudinarianism on the other, which suggested the existence in him of a depth of feeling much greater than might have been expected in one whose training, first in metaphysics and then in law, might have induced a hesitation to measure religious forces other than by the scales and measures of the lecture room or the Bar.

Often he spoke with intense feeling. He never lost patience, but he never for a moment forgot that he was trying to correct an injustice. He was still in essence a Nonconformist and a Puritan. He showed a great desire to be just, and showed, too, that he realised the delicacy of handling statistics, supposed to register

spiritual fervour and efficiency, in the ordinary manner of the statesman trying to make his point.

He added greatly to his reputation by his management of the Bill. He showed a real grasp of the question, into which he had entered with much labour, and he gave Wales no reason for complaint that any part of her case had not been presented in its proper light. His association with Welsh Nonconformity, begun at Oxford, was drawn closer. But he will make it closer yet.

CHAPTER VII

CHANGES IN THE PARTY

IT is now time to return to the political history of Mr. Asquith. His administration, during the two years which followed, brought to the party as much honour as any work done by the Government, and if the Featherstone incident injured Liberalism for a time in the minds of the working classes, his strong hopeful utterances, his intellectual calm, and his rigid adherence to current Liberal ideas attracted many among the thinking sections of the population. In the House of Commons, moreover, he rapidly acquired a great ascendancy. He had the exact qualities for pleasing a type of audience which was as fond of a certain cold eloquence as it detested heroics. His personal characteristics too appealed to those with whom he was brought into contact. He was not effusive, but he was not on the other hand distant. He was admirably direct in all his attitudes. "His character is simple, full of integrity, unselfish. No man is less of a *poseur*. A strong, healthy, simple-minded, reserved, upright man." That is one verdict pronounced upon him while yet he held office.

"He has mastered the technique of elocution," says another contemporary critic, who goes on to compare his literary quality with that of Macaulay. The

comparison here instituted might have been extended to the politics of the men concerned. Macaulay, too, was impatient of popular passion. He would have no man's vote unless it was given in the conviction that it was being applied to the best advantage.¹

"He manages Bills," went on Mr. Asquith's critic, "better than anyone but Mr. Gladstone."

A third commentator observes that "Mr. Asquith is a superb rhetorician, though his speeches do not read as well as they sound. His voice is not a grand or melodious organ like Bright's or Gladstone's, but it is good enough. He has a slight provincial accent, and his action is awkward, for he stands with one hand in his pocket and sways his body slightly as his mechanical sentences rise and fall. His style of composition is Corinthian: it is cold, it glitters, it makes its points, it damages its adversaries, and it has no soul. But it is suited to the House of Commons."²

The conclusion of this comment is interesting to-day. "Whether Mr. Asquith will be the next Radical Prime Minister it is impossible to say." But the writer finishes upon a note less of interrogation than of expectation.

The history of Mr. Asquith impresses the observer as being that of a man who never takes risks. He is always absolutely safe, as entirely conscious as a human being can be of all the possibilities of the future as they are arranged in aid of or in opposition to the particular action upon which he has determined.

His position in the party was soon a strong one. He took his place as a recognised leader. To his

¹ His letter in regard to his candidature for Leeds.

² *Saturday Review*.

hands had been committed the second most important legislative measure of the Government, the Dis-establishment Bill. His department was acknowledged to be one of the best conducted in the State. In so far as it is possible in the fluctuating circumstances of politics to call any politician's position assured, his could so be called.

During the autumn of 1893 he developed into the mouthpiece of the Government. He spoke so often in the country that *The Times* ultimately felt constrained to warn him that he might become a bore. This tribute to the usefulness of his apology for Liberal action and policy was in return for a very complete review of the work of the session.

His autumn platform work may be said to have begun at Althorp Park, the seat of Lord Spencer. At an open air *fête* held there on August 31st, he was the central figure. Yet he had only held office for a year. He was received with a warmth that perhaps surprised one who was more accustomed to the quieter approval of the intellectual classes. But his Radicalism, warmed at the fire of Mr. Gladstone's blazing passion for Irish Reform, was full of heat. His special knowledge of Ireland, due to his association with Sir Charles Russell, added weight to his utterances and enabled him to express Irish needs. He was more Gladstonian than Gladstone himself. For he would have nothing to do with the second chamber principle incorporated in the Home Rule Bill of 1886. His Imperialism would to-day be called parochial. "What is the Empire?" he asked at Leeds. "Like every political fabric which the genius of man has raised, it is a

structure which must stand or fall, not by its size or splendour, but according as it provides for the social and the spiritual needs and for the common human life of the men and women whom it shelters."

No better Liberal existed than he. His series of speeches, studied together, leave no doubt of that. He defended everything his party had done with the greatest spirit. At Althorp he would not hear anything about the use of the gag during the Home Rule Bill discussion. There was nothing in "all the talk about lack of opportunity." The House of Lords was going to do in three days what the House of Commons had worked six months upon. As for the Lords compelling them to go to the country, there was no precedent to make them do it.

His next appearance was at St. Andrew's Hall, Glasgow, on October 17th. Here he got a warm reception. There can be no doubt that at this time the people liked the tone of his speeches. He was a Radical; he showed it in all he said. He was a Gladstonian of the Gladstonians. He enjoyed Mr. Gladstone's peculiar confidence, as *The Times* was quick to point out. The man with an intense belief in a cause not only makes other people believe intensely in the cause, he makes them believe intensely in himself. Mr. Asquith's oratory might still lack exuberance; but it was not for lack of conviction. His speeches rang with conviction. At Glasgow he protested that the tribute was not to himself. "Yes, yes," yelled the people. He set upon the House of Lords, which had now rejected the Bill. "If they had not done so," he said with mock solemnity, "they would

have violated a tradition." Then he turned to answer his opponents' arguments. Nobody is better at this work than he. "There is no greater fallacy than to suppose the House of Lords a safeguard against rash legislation." It only criticised Liberal Bills. If they let the House of Lords go on overriding their wishes they had only themselves to blame. Then he began to discuss Home Rule. It is a curious feature of the Home Rule controversy that, however much the English section of Great Britain protested against the Bill, the Liberal politicians who had to carry it through Parliament continued to believe that the measure was growing in English favour. They hugged this delusion with remarkable warmth and ostentatious fervour. It was only the unheroic common sense of Lord Rosebery which discovered that England would not have Home Rule at any price.

Some idea of the place to which Mr. Asquith had attained is indicated by the fact that *The Times*, commenting on the circumstance that Lord Salisbury was the same night speaking at Preston, said, "Both speeches gained in interest from the mere fact that they were delivered contemporaneously." Moreover, it then went on to observe, "Mr. Asquith is apparently deep in the confidence of Mr. Gladstone." It dealt much more fully with Mr. Asquith's speech than with that of Lord Salisbury. Yet Lord Salisbury was the lately-resigned Prime Minister, a famous statesman, and the head of the party supported by *The Times*, while Mr. Asquith had only been one year and two months away from the private benches.

The association of the two names was a great tribute

to the younger man. But it was deserved. He was proving himself a true leader. Moreover, it is difficult to read these early speeches without being struck by their convinced Liberalism. "We believe that in the history of our race, of our country, there is an increasing purpose of which the larger abundance and the fairer apportionment of happiness is the end, and the associated energies of human beings in Society and the State are the means." A better statement of Liberal truth than that is not wanted in the world of political endeavour.

Three days later he arrived in his own constituency. Here the enthusiasm of Glasgow was put completely in the shade. His journey from the station at Leven became a kind of triumphal progress. He was met by the provost with a band and a thousand people, who bore him off to the National Bank, where further ovations awaited him. Then later in the Town Hall, crowded to its doors, he set out to deal completely with the question which was filling the thought of the country—Home Rule. He was working his autumn oratory on a system. Not contenting himself with vague generalities on the work of the session, he was dividing the chief subjects of debate among his several speeches. To Leven he gave his Home Rule message. The long controversy between England and Ireland was scandalous to the first country and dishonouring to the second.

"We assert that the old policy of endeavouring to govern Ireland by British voices against the will of the mass of the Irish people has been proved by experience to be a failure." That was pretty emphatic, but a

weary Unionist, sighing over his fruitless efforts to conciliate the turbulent sister kingdom, might almost say as much. "Home Rule is the only way to solve the question." The Unionist could not say this. Here was a convinced Home Ruler, whom indeed *The Times* chaffed because his belief in the Bill was greater even than that of its great originator. He ended by predicting Home Rule all round.

The night following he spoke again, this time at Ladybank, another part of his constituency. After this his next appearance was at Leeds. On the platform with him was the son of his leader, and his Liberal successor to the office he then held. He came there, he told them, because of Mr. Herbert Gladstone. He said little about Home Rule. Working through the complete Radical programme, he came to education. He claimed that the Liberals had, through Mr. Acland, made the Free Education Act a reality. He spoke of the voluntary schools. Mr. Acland had punished them because they were inefficient. Ten years later it was the inefficiency of the Welsh schools which gave Mr. Lloyd George his opportunity for smashing the power of Mr. Balfour's Education Act in Wales.

Then he turned to discuss municipal ideals. It is supposed to be a suitable subject for discussion in great provincial cities. He spoke with a moral fervour that almost amounted to passion. He wanted housing reform, he wanted to see cleared away all "slums and rookeries," and he demanded more baths, libraries, reading-rooms and open spaces. He approved of municipal politics being upon the same party footing

as national politics, because the Empire was only what they made it in their individual towns and villages. Patriotism, like charity, begins at home.

The Leeds speeches were the last of the course. The whole series was a splendid achievement. They left no doubt either of the strength or the wideness of his Liberalism. They brought him close to the people.

His relations with Mr. Gladstone had always been those of generous confidence. The overtopping greatness of the Premier protected him from the machinations of party intrigue. His friendships were on a larger and wider scale than most chiefs. But in Mr. Asquith he had always found a particular attraction. The Home Secretary was, therefore, at the beginning of the session of 1894, a personage of acknowledged importance. But he probably realised that, though his career was now shaping itself as he had hoped, it must soon go forward in new and perhaps less happy circumstances. The party was being kept together by the heroic energy of one old man. But Mr. Gladstone had long contemplated resignation, and the defeat of his Home Rule Bill, the fact that he was now much troubled by his defective eyesight, and, most important of all, his failure to prevent the Cabinet's agreement to an increase in the navy programme demanded by the Admiralty, all combined to turn his thoughts to a more immediate release than perhaps he had once contemplated.

The blow fell in April. The first intimation came to the country by means of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and was at once and most cheerfully denied by most of the other

papers. But it was still true. The most splendid figure in modern politics was to be withdrawn. Mr. Gladstone was to go. There was now a good deal of guesswork as to the Prime Minister's successor. The leader most generally favoured by the ingenious speculator was Sir William Harcourt, who had lately added to his great reputation by his Death Duties budgets. Mr. Gladstone had the intention of nominating Lord Spencer. But he was never asked to nominate anyone. The Queen informed him of her intention to send for Lord Rosebery.

It is fourteen years since that baffling personality reached the height of his significance in the mind of the country. Only once since, on the occasion of the Chesterfield speech in 1902, has he for a moment recaptured the imaginations in which, in 1894, he seemed to live. And it is scarcely possible even at this short distance of time to appreciate his importance to his party and its general delight in him, when it was known that he was to be the new leader. There was gloom at the loss of the old champion, but there was faith and a piqued interest in the new. The normal mind, disturbed as it may be by the unexpected, is not always certain to dislike these disturbances. It was a surprise that a leader more conventional—in the political sense—than Lord Rosebery was not called upon by the Queen. But, except amongst the Radicals who distrusted him—and those also who possessed a better realisation than most people of what threatened as a consequence of the appointment—there was an inclination to receive the new chief with enthusiasm. Lord Rosebery, except for one mistake, which is now

supposed to have been intentional, began well. He succeeded in inducing all Mr. Gladstone's ministers to remain with him, and set about carrying on the policy which the Government had hitherto borne. His most important change was the promotion of Lord Kimberley to the Foreign Office. There was to be no alteration in policy, and had the majority been a stronger one, there might have seemed a happy career before the new administration.

Mr. Asquith, in common with his colleagues, had consented to remain with the new Prime Minister. But he probably did so with less reluctance than did one or two other members of the Cabinet of longer standing. Between Lord Rosebery and himself there was a good deal of sympathy. They found themselves regarding questions from the same standpoint. There was also a personal factor in the mutual attraction ; as political friendships go, it was a close attachment, which was to strengthen during the next few years.

It has been said that Lord Rosebery, except for one mistake, began well. But this single error was in danger of retarding, to a great extent, his influence in his party.

He had succeeded a leader pledged to Home Rule, to the leadership of a party pledged to support the measure. The House of Lords, it is true, had sought to crush, and for the time had crushed, the Irish policy of the Government.

But when Lord Rosebery was called upon to give a lead to his party, he did so by making the speech in which occurred his famous phrase—the precursor of many such—about the “predominant partner.” That

partner was, of course, England. Until England is ready to give Home Rule, we can, said Lord Rosebery, do nothing. Let us suspend our Irish policy and get on with more useful work. Some day, perhaps, the country will come round to desire Home Rule. But in the meantime let us wait.

It was not an absolutely daring policy that Lord Rosebery advocated. But at the time it seemed a reasonable one, and one perhaps inevitable in all the circumstances. The majority was small. It was dwindling. So was the enthusiasm. The policy had all the appearance of being the best one possible. Whether it was really so is another matter. Hot zeal is the only thing which can keep a party alive. It is the paradox of politics, as it is the paradox of life, that the lost cause is the cause which carries in its train all the rewards. Six years later two English politicians were to sacrifice their reputations for what seemed a whim. In another six years one was Prime Minister, and the other was an important member of the Cabinet with a yet greater office almost within his grasp.

Lord Rosebery, in an interview with Mr. Lucy upon his "predominant partner" speech, asseverated his faithfulness to Home Rule, and no one questioned that he remained true. He wanted Home Rule. But he only wanted Home Rule when England did. He proposed to let England demand Home Rule. But he did not propose to constitute himself the spirit prompting her to the demand. His want of enthusiasm for Home Rule soon began to affect the allegiance of the Nationalists. The Parnellites particularly inclined to break off relations, and the Irish exhibited the

Liberal weakness by compelling Sir William Harcourt to withdraw a proposal to erect a statue to Oliver Cromwell within the precincts of Westminster.

Dissensions, it was soon known, were not absent from the Cabinet. A great Parliamentary figure, who had expected to succeed the old chief, was not inclined now to follow the lead of a younger man and to support a policy which, as he saw it, was divergent from that previously given by the head of the party.

Great sympathy was due both to him and to Lord Rosebery in the circumstances which arose. That the latter carried on the Government for a year with the insignificant majority at his disposal, while at the same time troubled with dissensions in the party and with personal ill-health, is the extraordinary fact. During this time the Liberals were exceedingly active in legislative proposals. Mr. Asquith was the chief figure in the last session in the Commons, introducing and passing the Factories Act, and introducing for the second time his Disestablishment Bill. It was his intention, as it was that of all the leaders, to exhibit the impotence of the popular electorate to get their will expressed in Parliament, owing to the action of the House of Lords. When this idea had been impressed upon the people's mind it was proposed to go to the country.

But long before the summer of 1895 Liberals were ready to throw up the sponge. The strain of ceaseless divisions, the strict control of the Whips—the stringency being made necessary by the fact of the small majorities recorded—the indifference of the House of Lords to remonstrances, above all the utter hopelessness of the

struggle, made them quite ready for the rest and quiet of Opposition.

But perhaps when Mr. Brodrick achieved his memorable defeat of the Government, there was one member of the Cabinet who could not withhold some feeling of regret. Mr. Asquith was able to look back upon three years of genuine achievement, to feel that he was now a recognised force in his party, and to believe that he was only at the beginning of his career; and now he saw coming what might be—what indeed was to be—an interruption covering many years. But the regret, if felt, could only be a personal one. No one who cared anything for the Liberal party could doubt that when the Prime Minister resigned he did not do so a day too soon.

Mr. Asquith thus, after but three years of official experience, found himself once more in Opposition. It would be in accordance with tradition, perhaps, to question whether at this point he could have guessed in what position of influence he would return to the Treasury Bench. The conventional answer would probably be that he never could have guessed. Yet doubtless he did.

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CHAPTER VIII

OPPOSITION

LIBERALS found themselves in Opposition with very little regret. The stress of the last session had been intense. The Whips never for a moment dared to relax pressure upon the forces in order to maintain what was nevertheless a dwindling majority. No excuse was good enough to allow of a Liberal member's absence. Attendance became a burden. The pleasant industries of office, or at least of membership of the Government party, to which victorious Liberal candidates had looked forward after the election of 1892, were found to be the forced labours of a bondsman. While supporters of the Opposition walked about with smiling face and springy step, Radicals hung round the lobbies which they dared not leave, with jaded limbs and faces grey and drawn. But though membership of the House of Commons, with its vague social ascendencies, is not easily forsaken by men who have had to do much to obtain what they hold, there comes a time when even the privilege of heading a hundred subscription lists and of saluting a score of obscure babies may be paid for too dearly, and so when at last the expected defeat had come, Liberals heaved a sigh of relief and went back to their constituencies, each with the cheerful consciousness that if and when he returned to

Westminster, he would do so as a member of the Opposition, a condition of existence the reduced importance of which is mitigated by the fact that the Whips' vigilance relaxes.

Lord Salisbury's appointments were in the hands of the public in the first week of July. The most notable fact in regard to them was the dominance in the new Cabinet of Mr. Chamberlain. The question of his adherence had once been seriously debated, but the alliance of the Liberal Unionists with the Conservatives had become so close as to make the complete fusion which now took place only a small development from the position which had existed just previously.

Mr. Chamberlain, perhaps with an instinct for future events, elected to fill the not greatly esteemed office of Colonial Secretary. The Duke of Devonshire became Lord President of the Council.

The Conservative programme was like most Conservative programmes, a negative one. It was the business of the intelligent electors to think of the danger to the Union rather than to call for measures of social reform. The "mess and muddle" cry, flung at each retiring party in turn, was now projected at the late Government. The most—perhaps the only—interesting feature in Unionist election addresses was the half-promise, conveyed in some of those published in the Birmingham zone, of old age pensions.

The election campaign now began in earnest, and one of the first speakers was Mr. Asquith. But the Liberals had no definite programme to put before the country. The speeches of several of the leaders were characterized by a curious independence of official

views, and it was said of Mr. Asquith that, while Lord Rosebery only asked for the mending of the House of Lords, Mr. Asquith called for its abolition. He also continued to take a strong line in favour of the Radical measures of Home Rule, Local Veto, and Dis-establishment. Personal reasons explain the emphasis put upon the last of these items from the Newcastle programme. But with regard to the first it must be remembered that Lord Rosebery's enthusiasm for Home Rule was rapidly cooling. Mr. Asquith's also has cooled since then, but at this time it had not done so. Local Veto had the support of the whole party; yet in pressing its importance upon the attention of his hearers, Mr. Asquith was pressing a measure with which was associated, not the leader of the section with which he had most to do, but the leader of another section, in the person of Sir William Harcourt.

The Conservative victory at the polls was the greatest Tory triumph of the century. Everywhere Liberals were defeated. The spectacle can scarcely be paralleled except by reference to the Reform Bill majority or to the great turnover of 1906. The wholesale defeat of ministers particularly finds a parallel in the last election. Mr. Morley was thrown out at Newcastle; Sir George Trevelyan at Tynemouth; Mr. Bryce in the Tower Hamlets; Mr. Shaw Lefevre, Sir John Hibbert, Mr. Arnold Morley, each lost his seat, while as the crowning misfortune Sir William Harcourt was refused by Derby. The blow to the cause of Temperance by this last defeat was a great one. But in the midst of all these reverses Mr. Asquith still

conquered, and with an increased majority, the figures being :

Asquith (L.)	4,332
Gilmour	3,616
	<hr/>
Liberal majority . .	716
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Defeated as were the Liberal leaders, and divergent as their opinions were supposed to be, they continued loyal to one another. Whatever disunion might be in the Cabinet, and however much the programme of one minister differed from that of another, they remained, by a firm tradition of British politics, each one to the others, faithful in all personal references. In one of his election speeches, indeed, Mr. Chamberlain criticised late ministers in words which really amounted to a compliment to their loyalty to one another :

“ You have heard Mr. Asquith singing the praises of Mr. Acland, and Mr. Acland has been ready with the praises of Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman. Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman has been saying what a splendid fellow Lord Spencer is, and Lord Spencer has been saying what a noble leader Mr. Morley is. They have all been praising one another.”

The Liberals at first tried to imagine that the decay of their interest would not extend beyond the boroughs. But when London and the counties began to poll, all hope disappeared. Lancashire went wholly Tory, and of sixty-two seats in London only eight were Liberal. The party indeed only held its ground in the south, a circumstance which was paralleled in 1906, when, in the

midst of unprecedented Radical triumphs, a newly-appointed Liberal minister was defeated at Hastings.

When it was all over the figures were found to be :

Conservatives . . .	340	} 411
Liberal Unionists . . .	71	
Liberals	177	} 259
Nationalists	82	

Unionist majority . .	152
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Mr. Asquith was accompanied back to the House of Commons by thirty-three Scotch Unionists and thirty-eight Scottish Radicals against the twenty-two and forty-nine respectively who had been his companions in 1892.

In his speeches after his election he turned, as every politician must turn, to explanations. He said the English were hysterical, and got a lecture from *The Saturday Review* in consequence—"It surely takes the self-confidence inseparable from high ability to make an error of that magnitude."

The new House assembled in August to wind up the business of the year. An autumn session followed. But as this progressed Liberals began to discover that, while the Unionist leaders were always present to encourage their own party, the Front Opposition Bench was being neglected by those who had a right to sit there. Instead of a small compact, alert minority, ready for any emergency, prepared with proper criticism for the first indication of the new Government's policy, there was a party without cohesion, almost without leadership, weak, acquiescent. Several of the leaders

were still without the seats that should give them back to the House of Commons. But some in the House were abstaining. One of these was Mr. Asquith.

But he had a reason for this. Unlike many of those who have private stores wherewith to sustain themselves while in the desert of Opposition, Mr. Asquith had to consider his future. He was not a rich man. He had commanded, however, a large income at the Bar. An old precedent seemed to forbid the return to advocacy of one who had once held Cabinet office. A question of dignity was supposed to be involved. Indeed, so important was it supposed to be that the person of the retiring minister should not again be soiled by contact with briefs, that a benevolent rule permitted the payment of a pension to any such office-holder whose performance of his duties had extended to four years, and who at the time of retirement would be unable without the pension to maintain the dignity of his position.

Apart from the fact, however, that it might very well occur to him to ask whether a return to the Bar and to fee-earning accorded less with dignity than did the acceptance of a State allowance, Mr. Asquith, as has been shown elsewhere, was disqualified from receiving that assistance by the fact that he had not been a minister for four years. He determined therefore to go back to the Bar, and in October resumed practice.

One curious feature of his return was that while hitherto in the House of Commons he had been the leader of Sir Robert Reid, at the Bar he was Sir Robert's junior.

His return to his profession withdrew him for the time from the House. For some months indeed he ceased to be the Parliamentary figure he had been. But this, even had he been assiduous in his attendance, would have been inevitable. Public interest always remains on that side of the House which is to the right of the Speaker, let it be any party which sits there. But this is particularly the case when a new Ministry has assembled, and is still full of energy, absorbed by ideas. Prominence on the part of the Opposition is even resented by the public at this time. It thinks the new men should have an opportunity. It refuses to be interested in attacks upon them.

That Mr. Asquith never for any length of time allowed the Bar to withdraw him from politics has been suggested in another chapter. The sacrifices he made to carry on platform propaganda in the country when the need for it was urgent are not in doubt. But in this, the first session of the new Parliament, he was not much seen in Westminster.

The Liberal party was now drifting on aimlessly. Nobody seemed to be very careful of its preservation. The blow it had suffered by the storm of the general election left it a broken wreck, on which the pilots were in danger of outnumbering the unhappy crew. And the wreck, as it drove on rudderless, only left the storm of the election behind it to draw nearer and nearer to the rocks of disaffection and disunion.

The party was separating itself into groups. Its enemies never tired of commenting upon what was held to be the strange state of Liberal affairs, though the truth is that there is nothing remarkable in the

spectacle of a party, defeated at the poll, dividing itself into sections and through the medium of the several sections treating itself to a good deal of useful criticism. The rank and file of the party which is in office are compelled to be loyal. But the compulsion is sometimes straining, and a little reaction in the first days of Opposition is not a matter for wonder. The criticism projected at the leaders, such as it was, came from back-bench Liberals. But while the Liberal leaders abstained from petulant attacks upon one another, it was not difficult for them to do so. For, in spite of what their enemies in the Press thought and believed, the bitter feelings which were said to set one against the other did not exist except perhaps in the minds of two men. Doubtless there was disappointment in the heart of one statesman who had done much for his party, that he had not been called to the leadership on Mr. Gladstone's departure. Doubtless, too, there was disappointment in the heart of the man who actually was called to the succession that he had not been able to obtain the general support which was necessary to success. The first was resentful because the other had, he felt, supplanted him. The second felt bitterness because in the other leader he saw the chief instrument in the withholding from him of the party support.

But neither Lord Rosebery nor Sir William Harcourt, tried as they both were, ever forgot his dignity, or what was due to the Liberal party. They remained strictly silent, and, though a report continued to circulate of differences, these did not find expression in the speeches of the two leaders.

One of the two men has retired ; the other is in his grave. Except in so far as the various policies they advocated are vital to the politics of to-day, no good object will be served by recalling the incidents which led to the final split. Both Lord Rosebery and Sir William Harcourt performed great services to the party to which they attached themselves, and Liberals may well subscribe their gratitude and withhold what can now be only futile criticism.

So much for the two leaders and their relations up to the point when Lord Rosebery took the step that finally severed him from the Liberal councils. The chief members of the party, apart from these two, continued in friendly association. Naturally they had each his individual sympathies, but each was not found, as a casual reader of the Tory Press might suppose him to have been, denouncing his companions with complete abandon and offering himself, with an ingratiating and complacent smile, as the guide, philosopher, and friend of the distracted party.

Mr. Asquith, in common with the other subordinate members of the late Ministry, maintained, so far as the Radical unrest was concerned, a wise silence. He announced himself loyal to his leader and to the Liberal party. He defended the work which the party had done when in power and the efforts they had made during the past session. He criticised the Government, as it was his duty as a member of the Opposition to do, and for the rest waited, as most good Liberals waited, in the hope that both the external and the internal wounds which the party had suffered would be healed by time.

The hope was vain. However much personal feelings might have been surrendered by one of the leaders in order to co-operate with the other, there would still be one difficulty which would remain insurmountable. As Mr. Asquith said later, the future of the Liberal party would be found to be less a question of persons than of purposes. It was the question of purposes which was to bring about the great disruption.

In 1895 Europe was shocked by reports of massacres in Armenia. Christian nations witnessed the persecution of a race which, weak and helpless though it was, still clung to the faith of Christ and braved the vengeance of the Mohammedan.

An agitation immediately and rightly arose in this country for strong intervention by the Foreign Office, acting, if necessary, independent of the Continental Powers. Such intervention, however, Lord Rosebery, and later, Lord Salisbury, could not see their way to make. They continued rather to make British representations at Constantinople harmonize with those of the Great Powers. The Sultan, who is generally credited, if with nothing else, with a grim sense of humour, continued to receive the messages with ideal Eastern courtesy and to ignore the contents with complete Eastern indifference.

But while the heads of Governments continued the policy of concerted but ineffectual protest, the people of this country, impatient of diplomatic hesitations, found themselves unable to endure the strain of waiting.

In their impatient demand they were not without a leader. The spectacle created by the Armenian persecutions could not fail to remind Mr. Gladstone of

other scenes of bloodshed, to prevent the continuance of which he had, twenty years earlier, hurried from a retirement which at the time he had believed final. It was the cry of Armenia that called him once more to the platform, and at a great meeting at Henglers' Circus, Liverpool, he thundered forth, as only he could, a terrible denunciation of Turkey's crimes and of England's inaction. He demanded intervention. He called upon Lord Salisbury to withdraw the English Ambassador from Constantinople, and he impugned the policy of dependence upon the co-operation of the other Powers.

But when he impugned Lord Salisbury he impugned Lord Rosebery also. Although not now holding office, the latter had only lately quitted it. The massacres were not coincident only with the period of Lord Salisbury's occupancy of the Foreign Office. They had begun while yet Lord Rosebery was there. Since the Conservatives had come into power, moreover, Lord Rosebery, though critical of their domestic, had supported their Eastern, policy. He felt that Mr. Gladstone's censure, whatever may have been the intention of its projector, descended upon himself.

The words of the old leader naturally had still tremendous weight with the party. The enthusiasm which had greeted his momentary return to the platform left no doubt of that. An idea that the views of other leaders more accurately reflected the feelings of Mr. Gladstone than did those of Lord Rosebery only increased the party's distrust of its nominal chief. Lord Rosebery realised this. His position had become a thankless one. He determined to escape from it;

and on the 8th of October he addressed a letter to Mr. Thomas Ellis, Chief Liberal Whip:—

“MY DEAR ELLIS,—The recent course of events makes it necessary to clear the air. I find myself in apparent difference with a considerable mass of the Liberal party on the Eastern Question, and in some conflict of opinion with Mr. Gladstone, who must necessarily always exercise a matchless authority on the party, while scarcely from any quarter do I receive explicit support.”

The letter wound up with a declaration of resignation from the leadership of the party.

Consternation was the feeling of his friends in the interval following. But among the leaders, and especially those leaders who were in closest communion with him, little surprise was felt. Mr. Asquith particularly had been aware that the step was meditated long before it was taken, and had done all in his power to persuade his leader to remain. Yet, under the circumstances, Lord Rosebery did the only thing possible.

His next step was to appear at a great meeting in Edinburgh, and upon his platform was Mr. Asquith.

In the foregoing narrative the latter's name has scarcely appeared. Yet while such a narrative is part of his history, the absence of his name from it really indicates better than anything else the part he took in all that preceded Lord Rosebery's resignation. He was in the midst of these events, but he regretted them. He hoped for peace. He was personally devoted to Lord Rosebery, but he was loyal to his party, and realised that least mischief follows fewest words. Until the resignation took effect he was silent. From the

shadow of Lord Rosebery he only emerged at the Edinburgh meeting. But even then he was thrust rather than thrust himself forward.

In drawing his still remembered speech to a conclusion Lord Rosebery, while he refrained from any reflections upon those who were supposed to differ from him, eulogised the members of the late Cabinet who had come to support him that night, and the first name he mentioned was that of Mr. Asquith. The name was greeted with "loud and prolonged cheers." This was very significant. "Loud and prolonged cheers" in the technical language of the reporter means something very different from "cheers" or even "loud cheers." It means that for the moment the audience forgets the speaker and carries its mind away to the person or subject whose name has just fallen from the speaker's lips. Lord Rosebery, having enumerated the ex-Ministers who sat with him on the platform that evening, paused, and then in terms that were scarcely less than those of affection, referred again to Mr. Asquith: "If I venture to single out Mr. Asquith from these," he said, "it is because we have been in habits of close and intimate political communion and because I see, and see with pain, that he has been singled out as not having been in hearty association with me. Nothing is more remote from the truth. Those who say this must know Mr. Asquith very little, because consummate and considerable as are his powers of brain, in my opinion his brain is not equal to his heart, and it is that rare combination of head and heart which in my humble judgment, if my prophecy is worth anything, will conduct him to the highest office of the State."

These words, though they attracted much attention, are really much less remarkable than the applause which earlier had greeted Mr. Asquith's name. Their importance depends upon the construction put upon them.

Mr. Asquith, when he heard them, knew that at such a juncture they could be construed merely as containing vague hopes for his future.

When, on the morning following, the papers set themselves to dot Lord Rosebery's i's and cross his t's, they implied that he had not merely resigned but had nominated his successor. There was a good deal of curiosity to see how Mr. Asquith would answer what was supposed to be an invitation.

Three days later he spoke at Auchtertochy, and then took occasion to repudiate, very emphatically, the idea that an invitation had been issued.

"I have observed with some surprise," he said quietly, "that some people, by what I cannot but think a strange misconstruction of language which was evidently intended by the speaker, and which was universally understood by the audience, to have been used for a totally different purpose, have attributed to Lord Rosebery an expression, or at any rate an intimation, of some preference of his own in the choice of his successor." He then denied that anything of the kind had been done. The passage shows that while the Edinburgh audience better understood the general sense of Lord Rosebery's mind than did Mr. Asquith, the latter realised better than they the care with which the retiring leader set himself to avoid any possibility of its being said afterwards that he had named his successor. It would have been contrary

to Lord Rosebery's fine instinct for the best traditions of politics to have done anything of the kind. But he could not avoid feeling the preference. What really happened was that the audience read in his mind an idea which he neither intimated nor expressed. It did not need a word from him to express what it felt itself, and what it believed and knew he felt. Mr. Asquith could scarcely have been ignorant of the hope of Lord Rosebery respecting him. But he was certain that no politician of Lord Rosebery's sagacity would have been guilty of the folly of suggesting a successor, unless when doing so he felt he was expressing the unanimous desire of the party.

Mr. Asquith at this time showed a modesty which those who do not know him would probably deny was one of his attributes. He refused to be exalted to the leadership. He effaced his own interests. He denied that it was time for either Lord Rosebery or anyone else to decide the question of the succession.

There were many Liberals who would have followed him, had he set up his standard. He had been one of the successes of the last Administration; he had great firmness and strength of purpose. He was completely trusted. But he refused to allow his name to be singled out from those of the other leaders. By his refusal he showed his possession of some of the higher qualities of statesmanship. He exhibited not merely unselfishness, but astuteness. The leadership of the party could not have been indifferent to one of his ambitious character. But he was completely free from the littleness of the man who would rather be leader of a section, lord of a suburb of the city of party, than

chief and king of the whole. Mr. Asquith would have been ready to succeed to the leadership if the whole party had called him. Otherwise he was much more desirous of serving under another leader. He was unselfishly devoted to the party. He wanted to see it at peace once more. Until that condition was reached, he told it, it had no need to talk of leaders.

His conduct through this time of stress—a time when his political destiny was being shaped—was completely satisfying alike to those who trusted his devotion and those who wanted, not only to see him true to his best instincts, but to see him leader. He was trying to make the party mark time. It was not an heroic policy, but at this juncture commonsense and a quiet mind were worth all the heroics in the world. The very fact that he held himself aloof from popular passion at this time helped and did not hinder him.

His action is marked by the qualities which those who have followed his career have learnt to expect. He showed admirable discretion in his refusal to move because a few hands beckoned. He exhibited his tenacity of purpose by the way in which he went on through the recess, performing the duties of an Opposition statesman, criticising the Government and refraining from criticism of his colleagues. He wanted to have a united side, and was ready to make sacrifices if Liberals could be drawn together. His feeling for efficiency made him desire, not a party of which he was a head, but a party which was united. If the Liberals had said that they could only have come together under his lead, they would have pleased him most of all. But he knew they could not say this of him. When the party,

in 1899, finally chose Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, Mr. Asquith at once gave his most cordial support.

Throughout the time of dissension he maintained a completely successful attitude of detachment from party feeling. He was much too shrewd to compromise his position by taking sides and much too impatient of the futilities of platform heroics to engage in them. He grasped, as scarcely anyone grasped at the time, the truth that the best course for the man who would help the party or for the man who hoped that the party would ask him to lead it, was silence. He put aside his immediate interests. He realised that greater than a man's interests is the man himself. But a man may stand back behind the throng and, if he is bigger than the throng, he will still be seen.

In the meantime his relations with Lord Rosebery were of the happiest, while in public he testified more than once his continued devotion. He had been acquainted with the intention of his leader long before the intention took effect. He had done his best to prevent the resignation. And futile as he knew the effort to be, he had tried, even before he had left the platform on the evening of the speech in Edinburgh, to persuade the leader to come back. "I venture to say in your presence to Lord Rosebery that leadership is a thing which involves reciprocal claims and reciprocal obligations. It is not in the power of either party to the contract to make an end to it at his own will. And the voice of the other party has not been heard." In the same speech he had also referred to Lord Rosebery's "unrivalled claims to the leadership of the Liberal party." At Galashiels, ten days later, he alluded to

the gravity of the blow the party had sustained, and went on: "We have all of us an absolute assurance that his retirement from the leadership does not involve his loss to the party, with which he remains in complete sympathy upon every one of the vital issues, whether of our foreign or of our domestic policy."

This public attitude towards his old leader reflected a sincere friendship rather than a great dependence. The quality of dependence, found sometimes allied to the nature of statesmen, not only of smaller, but of greater and more magnetic power than Mr. Asquith, is not found in him. There was nothing of the hysteria of expostulation in his attitude to his old chief. He said what he could to bring him back, but he knew too much of Lord Rosebery personally, and of the reasons which had led to the retirement, to suppose that his words would have effect. Having said his say, his eminently practical intelligence turned to the work of the coming session. He has always sought to make efficient even his devotion to the party. He was not going to spend himself needlessly upon service to any individual political interest. Do your duty, but avoid waste, whether of time, energy, sectional bias, or policy, represented his political ethics. He saw that there was work to be done, work not of a special kind, but the work common to an Opposition. So, ignoring the frantic partisanship which found expression at this time in many papers and on many platforms, he proceeded with a normal criticism of Government shortcomings.

The question with which he had most frequently to deal was that of Armenia. His audiences expected his

views upon that matter, whatever else he said or left unsaid. His relation with Lord Rosebery on the one hand, who disapproved of action independent of the Powers, and with the Liberal party on the other, most of whom wanted a definite lead in support of Mr. Gladstone's policy, placed him in a position of some delicacy. He got out of the difficulty as one of his nature was bound to do, simply by ignoring the fact that it was a difficulty. He treated the matter from the point of view of the moderate Liberal. Everyone was agreed that something ought to be done. But what actually *was* being done? Lord Salisbury refused to say anything; very well; he did not complain of any reserve that was rendered necessary by the exigencies of the case, but he did think "they were entitled in the strongest and clearest terms to assert that they would not be satisfied unless, when the time came for a full disclosure of what had taken place, it was found that England had been in the forefront as an impelling force . . . and that therefore, so far as national responsibility was concerned, we were clear of any blame or reproach. They ought to be no longer content with paper protests."

This exemplifies not merely his attitude to a particular question, but his general attitude of mind. He was unwilling that England, just as he was unwilling that he himself, should spend all upon a single cause. But the country must be able to satisfy its conscience that it had at least done its duty.

During the next year or two he was distinguished perhaps more for his work at the Bar than in the sphere of politics. In the meantime the Liberal ship plunged onwards through the darkness and soon

received another blow. In December, 1898, two years after Lord Rosebery's retirement, Sir William Harcourt, worn out and weary, who had been leader, not of the party as a whole, but of the party in the House of Commons, resigned his position. He had seen himself disappointed of a great but quite honest ambition, and was in no particular mind for the shells of leadership, now that the kernels had been abstracted by other hands. There was little likelihood of a return to power until years, perhaps many years, had passed. He therefore announced that he, too, did not intend in future to be officially associated with the party. In his expression of such an intention he was joined by Mr. Morley. The Liberals, accordingly, had to look out for a new chief.

Two names suggested themselves. The first was that of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. "C.-B." was generally popular; he was not an extremist. He maintained friendly relations with all the leaders. He was not likely easily to be perturbed. He had many supporters. The other name in the public mind was that of Mr. Asquith. But he was never nominated. There was never but one candidate. Putting the characters of the two men side by side there was no question that between them was to be seen nearly every difference which it was possible to find in human character. Each, however, had it in him to be a satisfactory leader, and for the reason that, much more than Lord Rosebery or Sir William Harcourt, each had in his nature something permissive of compromise. It is true that the permission sprang from quite different causes. And the difference may be mentioned here

because it marks the fundamental difference in the characters of the two men. "C.-B." was ready to compromise because he naturally preferred in all things the *via media*. He liked his own way, but his own way was usually the middle one. Mr. Asquith was more of an extremist. But Jowett had taught him to go round if he could not get over. He had endless determination, but he had endless discretion. He would compromise because by compromise he was sure some day to get his will.

He had, however, against him one influence which it was useless for him to try to shake off—the suspicion of the Harcourt Liberals. He was a Roseberyite. He was known to be favoured by the late Premier. It was feared that what had happened before might happen again. His manner also was not of the kind which excites popularity. He appeared a little cold. His character was felt to be aloof, austere. Moreover, he had not succeeded in touching the imagination of the man in the street. It may be said that neither had "C.-B." That is true; but in the House of Commons "C.-B." had always been the most popular Liberal minister of the time. His shrewd and smiling face was always welcome. As to the possibilities of his leadership, there was this argument in their favour, that nothing was known of them.

A story is told that once, at the very club in which the new Liberal leader was chosen, an election was proceeding for new members. Presently the results were announced, and it was noticed that two persons prominent in the world of politics had been black-balled. "But why is this?" asked a member-

"everybody knows *them*, while here is Blank elected without opposition. Yet nobody knows anything about him!"

"That is *why* he is elected," was the shrewd answer.

For the same reason Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman found himself at the head of the party. From the meeting at which he was elected Mr. Asquith was kept by illness. But his support of the elected chief was cordial and immediate.

The Liberal party, now that it was provided with a new leader, supported by the chief persons on the Front Opposition Bench, might well have hoped for a little peace and quietness. If such a hope was ever held it was not long of disappointment, though whether it was really ever cherished by the shrewder observers is open to question. The frail flower of Liberalism, crushed beneath the storm of the Armenia dissension, was just beginning to raise its head again, when it was struck by the cyclone of Imperialism. Political meteorologists had probably seen already, in the Eastern storm, signs of what was coming, while even the ordinary observer was able to perceive that the sky was never completely clear of clouds.

But for first signs of the trouble which threatened it is necessary to look back before the autumn of 1896 to a period twenty years earlier. Until the war of 1899, the period, 1874—1880, showed the high water mark of British self-consciousness. In 1876 Disraeli had invested his Sovereign with the pompous title of Empress of India. In 1878 the circumstances which led up to the signing of the Berlin treaty were the cause of an extraordinary exhibition of national

egotism, which in its turn found expression in an unrestrained, and what was then a rare and curious, outburst of public sentimentality.

Presently came the inevitable reaction, the Liberals succeeded to power and the "jingo" spirit, as it had come to be called, slept. But in 1885 Mr. Gladstone announced his plan for Irish Home Rule. At once the "jingo" became active. "Lord Salisbury," says Mr. Winston Churchill in his life of his father, "in the closing years of his life once said that Mr. Gladstone in struggling for Home Rule awakened the slumbering genius of Imperialism."

The genius of Imperialism rested rather than slept during the year of Liberal victory in 1892. But when, two years later, Lord Rosebery succeeded to the leadership, the genius began to discover that she need not necessarily hide her head while a Liberal Government was in power.

At this time, however, she had only vague hopes upon which to go. The party difference was a good deal a personal one between two leaders whose natures were not made for easy assimilation. But the Fashoda incident showed in what direction Lord Rosebery's mind was tending, and the war which broke out in 1899, two years after this affair, emphasised the cleavage in Liberal sentiment.

Although Lord Rosebery was not officially associated with his old party, he yet commanded great influence with one section, and his few utterances were listened to with eagerness.

Mr. Asquith's attitude towards the question which was dividing the party was characterised by the qualities

of the man. His sympathies lay in the same direction as those of Lord Rosebery. But Lord Rosebery was free from the restraints of official leadership. Mr. Asquith, on the other hand, was not. He saw that there would be quite enough difficulty to maintain the work of Opposition without emphasising the divergence between the various sections of the party. He declined therefore to emphasise these differences. Not that he refrained from speaking upon the war. No public man who essayed to address a meeting was expected to talk of anything else. But he spoke very rarely. While, during each autumn of several previous years, he had delivered eight or ten speeches, in 1899 he spoke only twice upon political themes. The first of the two speeches was almost the first to be made by any member of the Opposition after the war broke out. He said frankly that the views he would express were merely his own, and that he had not had time to consult his colleagues. Then having criticised the Government for blundering into war, he said that now that the conflict had begun it must be brought to a finish. Many even of his admirers could not support him in this attitude. But Mr. Asquith took the view that the only possible peace was a peace which followed on British victory.

This was the opinion he held and expressed on the few occasions on which he spoke. For the rest, he kept himself out of the public eye. He did what he conceived to be his duty to his country. But he did not find that to do that involved him in the necessity to injure his party.

The Radicals who differed from him now found new ground for complaint in his attitude towards them at this time. But he never fell into excess. From the impulses of vague jingoism his character would always keep him healthily free. From the spirit which provoked the excesses of Mafeking night he was completely remote. He locked himself in and refused all invitations to come forth and denounce "Pro-Boers" and "Little Englanders."

It is true that politically he and two of his colleagues found themselves out of touch with their lately-elected leader. Mr. T. P. O'Connor has drawn a picture of the Front Opposition Bench of this period, and of the spectacle witnessed there, when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman sat in the centre, Mr. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, and Sir Henry Fowler in one corner, and Sir William Harcourt and Mr. Morley in the other corner.

In the meantime he (Mr. Asquith) went on with his work in the courts, watching events and offering only a sparing comment. He believed that we had entered upon the war because we had been driven into it. There was, he held, no truth in the allegation that the struggle would not be considered satisfactory in its result if a consequence was not the annexation of the Transvaal.

"I dissociate myself, however, entirely from those, if such there be, who hail the war, this lamentable war, as a means to an ulterior end, the subordination of the Boers and the annexation of the Dutch Republic. Such an intention has been emphatically and repeatedly repudiated by Her Majesty's Government. To adopt that, to coquet with it, to connive at it, would be to justify a hundredfold the charges of pharisaism and

hypocrisy which are being freely levelled against us . . . by the writers of the Continental Press."

The war took even more money and much more time than it was expected to take, and when it was over the well-known instinct of the human race to patronise its earlier opinions asserted itself. Moreover, there was a feeling that the possibility of a repetition of such a struggle must be removed by annexation.

But there were a number of powerful persons in South Africa who had built all their hopes on just such an ultimate result, and who would not have been satisfied with less. Mr. Asquith showed less than his usual perspicacity in not realising that, disinterested as was his own support of Lord Salisbury, many who egged on the Government had their minds not upon national honour but upon dividends.

But whatever may have been his view of the struggle, there can be no question of his thankfulness when it ceased. British support of the war must have had many features lowering to his pride in his country as well as personally distasteful to one of his naturally critical intellect. But apart from this he has always been a hater of wars. It may be claimed that everyone is. But this could not have been said in the autumn of 1899.

To suppose Mr. Asquith a ranting jingo—prancing, "tickler" in hand, in the face of a sullen Dutchman—is a mere caricature. His detestation of war has always been undisguised. Even the Boer war, inevitable as he felt it to be, filled him with horror. "I am one of those who hoped against hope, who expected almost against expectation, that the catastrophe would

be averted." This is not the language of the political jingo of the period. Yet it might seem part of the idle rhetoric of regret were there not a marked absence from the rest of the speech of incitement to national passion. Of war in general he has not hesitated to use strong terms. "We have not got rid," he had said in 1893, "but we are getting rid, in our international relations, of the barbarous arbitrament of war; and we are substituting for it procedure which is at once more rational and more humane." He went on to refer to "those barbarous and antiquated methods in the settlement of disputes between nations." War must always have revolted a mind so free from passion. An institution which dethroned reason and set up something in its place could only be hateful to one who loved to approach everything in a judicial way.

It was in September, 1900, that Lord Salisbury's Government, taking advantage of an excellent opportunity, resigned. The country was hot with patriotism. It was intent upon one thing only—the war. The Tories asked for a mandate to finish the conflict, and refused to allow any other issue to be put before the electorate.

The Liberal leaders agreed to treat the question as one which had gone beyond their control. They tried to concentrate upon criticism of the confused methods by which the war was being conducted, rather than to demand, the one section a relentless prosecution of the fight, and the other, its immediate cessation. A few of the unofficial Radicals, assisted by Unionists such as Mr. Courtney, had the courage to stand up in face of abuse unparalleled in modern political history, and denounce the war's continuance. But the official

leaders tried to keep together, while only in one constituency, Caithness, did the difference of opinion between the sections of the party find expression in a contest between a Liberal Imperialist on the one side and a pro-Boer on the other.

Mr. Asquith, when he appeared in Fifeshire, found that he had not lost ground, and when the election took place he was returned at the head of the poll by a majority three votes more than double his majority in 1895.

The scars left upon the Liberal party by the war did not heal immediately. Some months before peace was signed there had been the famous interlude of Chesterfield. Mr. Asquith had been on Lord Rosebery's platform ready, with him, to clean the slate and begin again. But the party as a whole still clung to the old programme. It did not want a clean slate. For a time, then, there was a pause. The sections were still sections, but they waited with a disposition for peace.

Curiously enough, the peacemakers were to come from the other side, and the first effort to unite the sections was made—it must be admitted, unconsciously—by Mr. Balfour, when he introduced the Education Bill of 1902. Mr. Asquith at once took a leading part in opposition. It is quite certain that whoever had wanted to make mischief in the party, he himself had desired, had even ardently desired, to have an opportunity of joining hands with others of the leaders. He went through the country with a relentless criticism of the Bill. He spoke early and late against it in the House of Commons, and in November he appeared at a great meeting at the Alexandra Palace upon the same platform as Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman.

CHAPTER IX

THE FISCAL QUESTION

SOME of the best services which have been rendered to a party have been rendered by members of the opposing side. An acknowledgment of such a service will naturally be surveyed with some suspicion, even by a politician of the most detached convictions. But such acknowledgments have several times been earned. Mr. Gladstone, on Lord Salisbury's confession, relit the fires of Imperialism with the torch of Home Rule. Mr. Chamberlain abolished disunion from the ranks of Liberals, and made the party a new and vital political force, by inviting the country to return to Protection.

The Liberal leaders were not sorry to find a reason for drawing together, and their anxiety for union is, perhaps, the best answer to the suggestion that each was manœuvring for the supremacy, or that each was deliberately withholding himself from any but a section of the party.

Nothing could be better than Mr. Asquith's attitude at this time. He wanted to see a united party, and he rejoiced to say, as later in the year he was able to do, that :

"The Liberal party was never more absolutely united on every living issue in the field of politics. Every Liberal must have read with a sense of welcome and

relief the language recently used by Lord Rosebery and by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. This language is so clear in expression, so fine in temper, so generous in feeling as to do honour to both of the distinguished men who are concerned! " ¹

In the defence of the institution of Free Trade Mr. Asquith at once took a leading place. That he did so, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman never hesitated to acknowledge. He was welcomed by the party with ready unanimity, and set to work at once upon the great task to the performance of which he felt himself called.

For the work he was admirably qualified, not only by his particular gifts, but by temperament. He had a logical sense developed to the utmost, a quick recognition of the inexact, a complete readiness in disputation, and splendid tenacity. For such a controversy as that upon which he was now entering, these qualities were the very best with which he could have been endowed. He knew from the beginning that the task was one for which he was suited, and he took it up without hesitation. But, as has been said, the work was also peculiarly suited to his temperament. His Radicalism had undergone a change. It was not now, as it had been in the days of the '93 speeches, exuberant and overflowing. He was at heart as sound a Liberal as ever. He was a Liberal Imperialist, rather than an Imperialistic Liberal. His Liberalism qualified his Imperialism rather than his Imperialism his Liberalism. But he had ceased to be the Radical he had been. He was disinclined to violent changes.

The defence of Free Trade therefore exactly suited

¹ St. Neots, Nov., 1903.

his frame of mind. The very word "defence" indicates an attitude to him characteristically congenial. He had not to go forward or invite the country to rush blindly into the unknown. Mr. Chamberlain was doing that; the Conservatives were now the Radicals. What he had to do was to hold his ground, to prove to the country the supreme folly of change. Such a brief was completely satisfying to his qualities of discretion and tenacity.

Once more had Mr. Chamberlain been kind to him. He found himself again in the complete confidence of his party. He was welcomed everywhere as the official spokesman of Free Trade. Whatever, and however serious, may have been the differences in the party ranks, there was no sign of them now that the Protection danger appeared. Mr. Asquith's appearances were hailed by the Radical and the Liberal Imperialist alike as incidents in a campaign, in a hope for the success of which each recognised the other to have a common share.

Mr. Chamberlain first announced his new policy on May 15th,¹ on the occasion of his first appearance at Birmingham after his return from South Africa.

It was understood, however, that the platform campaign proper could only begin in the autumn. Summer political gatherings are unusual occurrences. But Liberals recognised that a great danger threatened and that immediate preparation must be made to repel it. What was described as a "special emergency meeting" of the general committee of the National Liberal Federation was called for July 1st. It is indicative of the party's confidence in Mr. Asquith

¹ 1903.

that he was asked to be the chief speaker at this function. The importance of the meeting was considerable, not only because of the circumstances in which it was held, but because of the fact that at it would be formulated a definite criticism of the scheme thrust upon the country by the New Protectionist.

When Mr. Asquith appeared he was greeted with a warmth which left no doubt of the sincerity of his hold upon the party. The meeting was composite enough to satisfy the most convinced believer in Liberal sectionalism. Dr. Spence Watson and Mr. R. D. Holt, the latter a distinguished north country Liberal who had had the courage to oppose the war, were upon the platform to greet this leader of the Liberal Imperialists.

His attitude, when he began his speech, was the one most characteristic of his mind, and the one best suited to the case. He avoided appeals either to emotions or to party prejudice. The matter was one for reason. He was a lawyer accustomed to summon to his aid the compelling force of argument. The best way to protect Free Trade from interfering hands was to compare its services with those of the system to which it was proposed to revert, to examine the exact character of the proposals now made, and particularly to apply the principle which underlay these proposals not only to certain specified trades and colonies, but to the whole field of industry and the entire Empire. This was what Mr. Asquith did. He went carefully through Mr. Chamberlain's proposals, and he found that they rested upon vague idealism, and had not been thought out. Mr. Chamberlain had rather suggested that a new tariff system should be

founded, than worked out the exact details of what such a system should be. Mr. Asquith appeared in the capacity of one prepared to develop the proposals so that they could be looked at in the developed form. He has always had a feeling for contingent fact. In this he was able to show himself superior to Mr. Chamberlain. Particularly did he fasten upon the question of Colonial Preference. Mr. Chamberlain had proclaimed, with what seemed unmistakable emphasis, that his proposals would not require any tax on raw materials. But if a Colonial Preference was to be guided by equity, a tax on raw materials was unavoidable. If a duty was put on American corn to please Canada, and on Argentine mutton to please Australia, South Africa would want one put on Russian wool. This was only one instance. But it served very well, and when he spoke at the Liberal Federation meeting he pressed it home. Throughout the autumn campaigns he reiterated, with what to the Tariff Reformers must have been painful monotony, his forecasts of the results of a fair application of the Preference principle to the States of the Empire. Particularly did he quote the instance of the South African demand for a wool preference, when he spoke to the Bradford wool spinners in December.

This localisation in the character of the successive speeches was a feature both of his and of Mr. Chamberlain's campaigns. The Fiscal question, as Mr. Asquith told his hearers at St. James's Hall, "is not a matter of sentiment but of business." Both speakers bore this in mind and both tried, in each town he visited, to show the good or ill effects—

as he happened to conceive them to be—which would be brought upon the local industries by the country's rejection or acceptance of the new proposals. "Agriculturists will have to pay more for their tools," he told an agricultural audience at St. Neots,¹ "the only people who will benefit by Protection are not the labourers or farmers, but the landlords." "How will Cornwall benefit by these proposals?" he asked at Penzance.² "Cornish trade is in tin. Most of our tin comes from the Straits Settlements. There will be no tax on that."

The question of Preference, though he made it the crux of nearly all his arguments, was not the only point upon which he laid great emphasis. He controverted indeed nearly every claim which Mr. Chamberlain put forward for the need of fiscal change. The latter had made his well-known suggestion for a 2s. duty on corn—an impost which he denied could be felt by anyone. But what possibility, asked his opponent, was there that the tax would remain at that figure? "I warn you of this," he said solemnly,³ "your 5 per cent. will become 7 per cent., and your 10 per cent. 20 per cent. There is no halting place until you get to the bottom." "Protection," he told his hearers over and over again, "is like an inclined plane."

Another suggestion he hotly contested was that, encouraged by Preference, Canada would soon supply nearly all the wheat required by this country. "It is ridiculous to suppose that a 2s. duty on corn is going to turn the whole wheat supply into Canada."³

Some people appeared to think that the tax had only

¹ Nov. 19th.

² Nov. 26th.

³ Cinderford, Oct. 8th.

to be imposed when, "as by a wave of a magic wand, Canada would at once blossom into cornfields ripe for the sickle and supply this country with all that it had obtained from other countries. We had taken from the United States 60,000,000 cwts. of wheat and wheat flour, and from Canada 8,000,000. It does not require much imagination or knowledge to compute, at any rate conjecturally, the number of years before the one source of supply could be made good by the substitution of the other." "Canada," he said at Bradford, "would have to increase her yield fourfold to meet our demands."

These appeals were to abstract reason. But he made another directly to the business instinct of the commercial men who came to his meetings. There were two questions, he said: What are we going to give? and What are we going to get?¹ The country would naturally want something in return. Matters standing as they did, we should want preferential treatment in the Colonies for our manufactures. The point was one that deserved careful study. The whole of the British possessions outside the United Kingdom imported at that moment commodities of the value of £230,000,000. Of that amount no less than 62 per cent. came from the British Empire itself. In other words, foreign countries did with our Colonies only 38 per cent. of the latter's total import trade, and the 38 per cent. consisted very greatly of commodities we could not supply—oil, for example. Would anyone say that the Colonial statesmen were prepared to reduce their tariffs to such an extent as to allow British

¹ St. James's Hall, July 1st.

manufacturers to go and compete in the Colonial markets with native manufacturers? Mr. Chamberlain suggested that an "offer"—the famous offer—had been made by the Colonies. His opponent's curiosity was at once aroused. At St. Neots, on November 19th, he referred to the offer and asked for details. The question was taken up everywhere. It became the centre of a separate controversy. To-day no one supposes that Mr. Chamberlain got no offer, but its vagueness removed from it all interest.

Mr. Asquith denied that the condition of our Colonial relations demanded the granting of a preference. It was a calumny on the Colonies. Their attitude had never been more friendly. But Preference would lead to jealousies; raw materials would be taxed to avert these, and then we should be in trouble with the great trading nations. "The Empire must not be sustained by enmity with the world."¹

Mr. Chamberlain's proposals had two objects in view—to bind the Colonies to us by a golden bond of Preference and to retaliate upon foreign countries whose tariff walls were stopping the progress of our export business. Preference was called for by the attitude taken up towards us by the Colonies, and retaliation by the stagnation of British trade.

So far counsel for the prosecution of Free Trade. The defence dealt with the question of Preference in the manner already shown. In answer to the charge that trade was stagnant, the defence gave a complete denial. Mr. Chamberlain, said Mr. Asquith, persisted in confining his figures to export trade. But the

¹ Cinderford, Oct. 8th.

way to measure the volume of a country's commerce was to include not only exports but imports also. The latter were often in the form of raw materials which would be handled by British industry before finding its way to the retail market: for instance, there was steel and iron. Moreover, not only were these imports carried for the most part on British ships, but to a very large extent they represented the income and dividends on the investment of British capital in foreign countries. It is not possible to judge the condition of this country by looking only at its foreign trade. A reduction in export trade means often that the home trade is so great that manufacturers have no time to attend to orders from abroad. It was true that a certain number of manufactured goods came to the country, but they were commodities which the foreigner made better and cheaper than we did.

Trade, however, was not stagnant. "During thirty years the amount on which income tax is charged has doubled, interest on our foreign investments has more than doubled, deposits in savings banks had multiplied two- or three-fold. Bankers' cheques cleared have risen from £530,000,000 to over £800,000,000, and wages have risen, not only in money, but in the proper way of looking at value, in what the wages can buy. One hundred shillings buys as much as one hundred and forty shillings twenty-five years ago."¹

But suppose that we did retaliate, what would we retaliate on? Suppose we did so on Russia, our trade with whom was £25,000,000, or with the United States, our trade with whom amounted to £127,000,000? As

¹ Cinderford, Oct. 8th.

£23,000,000, or eleven-twelfths of the whole of our import trade with Russia, and £108,000,000, or seven-eighths of our import trade with the United States, was in food and raw materials, "we cannot retaliate on these two countries without injuring our working classes or our manufacturers, or both."

The Tariff Reformers said that at the moment the country was not free to negotiate with foreigners. "Who," asked Mr. Asquith, "has taken away our freedom?" We could always deal with cases as they arose, as witness the Sugar Bill. It was also said that tariffs were more severe than formerly. They were not. "They had increased in stringency during the past thirty years, but they were mildness itself compared with those which existed before Free Trade."

As this remark indicates, he would not let it be disguised from the people that if they lent a willing ear to the Birmingham Charmer they would go straight back to Protection. "There was no middle ground between Free Trade and Protection," he told his hearers at Barnstaple (November 24th). He did not claim that Free Trade was a system perfect in every detail, but it was completely and immeasurably exalted above every other that offered. "Retaliation" he called the "provisional programme" of the Tariff Reformers, but he told his audiences plainly what would follow. Indeed, when he spoke at Barnstaple, he believed that he was already able to convict his rival of having taken the final step in his policy. "Mr. Chamberlain," he said, "after ten platform speeches was, from being a Free Trader, a Protectionist."

The Tariff Reform argument was founded to a large

extent on the industrial position of Germany. Mr. Asquith accordingly from the first set himself to examine very carefully the conditions of German trade. Germany, he admitted, had made great strides. But did anyone suppose that England would maintain the monopoly of the world? Yet what were the facts about Germany? At that moment in that country the value of exports per head of population was seventy-eight shillings. In Great Britain it was one hundred and forty-two shillings. Again, between 1880 and 1900 the increase in the trade in British exports to Germany was greater than that in the trade in German exports to England. Moreover, the British manufacturers importing from Germany were mostly importing raw material on which British capital was later going to be exercised to complete it, or when they were manufactures in their finished state they were manufactures which the Germans could produce more cheaply and better than we ourselves could. "Upon which of these two claims," asked the relentless examiner, "was the country to retaliate." Germany, he went on, had two advantages: cheap labour, which we do not want, and a better system of secondary technical education, which we do want. "There lies the true road of retaliation!"

In Germany a workman worked longer hours for lower wages, paid more for his food, and received inferior protection from danger to life. In the United States a workman got higher wages, but had to pay more for his food. "I would like anyone to name any country in the civilised world where at the moment the general average condition of the labouring classes is as good as in England."

As for foreign tariffs being directed against this country, they were just as much directed against our Protectionist rivals. In Germany, for instance, by the most-favoured-nation clause, we had as good a footing as any of our rivals. Take the case of France and the United States, two protected markets, and compare imports into these markets from the United Kingdom with those from Germany. Into the market of France the United Kingdom sent £24,000,000, as against the £15,000,000 of Germany; while into the United States the United Kingdom sent £27,000,000, against the £16,000,000 which Germany sent.

He went over the figures of his opponent very carefully, and put his finger at once upon any use of statistics which he did not consider warranted. He criticised Mr. Chamberlain, for instance, because he took 1872—a year of exceptionally bad trade—as his year for comparison, and also because for the purposes of another comparison he had chosen the years 1847—8. Free Trade did not come into operation until 1849.

“This is a proposal,” he said, surveying the whole scheme, “to tax British industries, to tax the food of the people, and thereby diminish their wages; to tax the raw material out of which our wealth is made. It is a scheme which is based on unfounded assumptions and unproved inferences.”

He reminded the people of what Protection had meant to them when they had had it. Mr. Chamberlain said wages would rise. Why should they? In the old days of Protection agricultural labourers got six to eight shillings a week. Mr. Chamberlain said that Protection enabled foreign countries to undersell us

here with the produce of cheap and sweated labour, and in the same breath he pointed to the improved condition of the foreign workman as an argument in favour of Protection.

A word which was on many lips and in many leading articles was "dumping." It was understood to be a term of the most appallingly sinister import. Mr. Asquith, however, did not hesitate to meet the charge that Free Trade encouraged "dumping." He defied the Tariff Reformers to mention a single trade which had been killed by "dumping." The Americans, though they had tried, had quite failed to capture the cycle trade. "From the headquarters of 'dumping,' the United States, 600,000 men were discharged in the early part of November. There was also a reduction in wages of 25 per cent. This did not look as if the 'dumping' did much good to those engaged in it!"¹

While he criticised the Tariff Reformers he always added a note of warning to the people who, without personal experience of the days of Protection, inclined to fiscal adventures. "Anything which tends to check the inflow of commerce, raises an artificial barrier against it, or tends to diminish the area of the people's employment, impoverishes both capital and labour. Peel and Gladstone gave the country cheap bread, the free market, an open door. We must see that we do not throw away the splendid results of their work."

The campaign ended in a great personal triumph for himself. Any suspicion which had been felt of his Liberalism vanished as one meeting succeeded another and he still pursued his brilliant cross-

¹ At Penzance.

examination of Tariff Reform. Indeed, at this time he had every reason for satisfaction. Liberal differences had disappeared, and he was able to serve the Liberal cause, not only in the way he preferred, but in the way the party itself most desired he should serve it. It cannot be said that he overshadowed Mr. Chamberlain in the eyes of the country at large ; no one has been able to do that since Mr. Gladstone died. Mr. Chamberlain always filled the public mind and touched its imagination. At this time, moreover, from the day in October when he set out from Birmingham to begin his series of speeches at Glasgow, he enjoyed something of a royal progress. But Mr. Asquith knew in the end it was he and not his more picturesque opponent who had secured the verdict.

The Times dealt fairly with him. It gave to his St. James's Hall and Cinderford speeches almost as much space as it rendered the rival speaker. The year ended upon a great triumph for the Free Trade champion.

The controversy was remarkable in that it was a two-men affair. Mr. Gladstone in the Home Rule days had been like one lion among many wolves. But in the Fiscal campaign there seemed to be room only for two figures. Other politicians, it is true, contributed to the discussion, but the debate belonged to Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Asquith. The Prime Minister's appearance in the controversy Mr. Asquith ridiculed good-humouredly. Of "Mr. Balfour's Notes on Free Trade," he said that "It contained, it is true, a few perfunctory and not altogether accurate statements as to the condition of British trade, but for the most

part it is concerned with the operation of an imaginary code of an imaginary Cobden upon an imaginary island in an imaginary world." From both sides there came periodical interventions. But the debate still went on between the same two men. They concerned themselves chiefly with the subject before them and with one another. Their respective platform methods were quite different. Mr. Chamberlain appealed often to sentiment; Mr. Asquith never. The first offered dreams; the second hard facts. The Tariff Reformer contrasted the present with the unknown future; the Free Trader the present with the known past.

At this time Mr. Asquith travelled much. Worcester and Fifeshire, London and Penzance, St. Neots and Bradford and Barnstaple were only some of the districts in which he appeared. He kept on dogging his opponent as the latter continued his progress to Protection, and never relaxed his pursuit until the political destruction of the other was clear to all.

The campaign thrust upon its conductor an enormous strain. But, as has been said elsewhere, he was tough enough not only for his platform work but for his daily labours in the courts. The full results of his work he could not yet see. But they went on developing to reach a grand and satisfying climax in January, 1906.

The year which followed was marked chiefly by a continuation of discussion on various aspects of the Fiscal question. Mr. Balfour declined to commit himself to an attitude of support either for the Chamberlainites or for the small but intellectual section of Unionists who dissented from the Birmingham heresy. A feeling began to come over the country that the Protection

campaign had failed. Mr. Balfour was suspected of having no particular enthusiasm for what was called Tariff Reform, and to be waiting for the general election to free him from his embarrassments. But he showed no disposition to resign immediately, though urged to do so by Mr. Chamberlain upon the one hand and the Liberal Opposition on the other. The passing of every moment lessened the hope of a Protectionist victory. Had an election taken place the day after the Glasgow speech, the country, fascinated by the figure of its most popular politician, might have thrown him its vote. But Mr. Asquith had compelled it to reflection. With him, it examined the Glasgow programme. With him it saw that there was no avoidance of an ultimate tax on food and raw materials. Its coldness towards the new proposals now steadily increased.

In 1904 Mr. Chamberlain proposed the summoning of a Colonial Conference to discuss Preference. Mr. Balfour first refused the suggestion and then agreed to it, but said that it must be summoned not by the existing but by a new Parliament. A year passed, however, without a dissolution. Then Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman made a speech in which he encouraged Irish hopes of Home Rule. Lord Rosebery, whose political activity had been somewhat suspended, now appeared in the West of England, and in a series of speeches repudiated, for himself at least, all proposals to return to the old Irish policy of the Liberal party.

Mr. Balfour had no particular wish to see a general election fought on Tariff Reform, though he knew

that the Free Traders would try to make that the issue. In this sudden reopening of the Home Rule controversy he saw an opportunity for embarrassing his opponents. He decided to resign and to warn the country that the strongest section of the Liberal party was still committed as much as ever to Home Rule.

For some time before he took this step a dissolution had been in the air. But neither of the two wings of the Liberal party were going to allow the country to be frightened into returning a third Tory majority. The Fiscal issue had brought them into co-operation; they were not to be separated by Mr. Balfour.

Mr. Asquith went into Fifeshire for his usual autumn meetings, and when, on October 11th, he appeared at Earlsferry he was heckled about the question which had suddenly been recalled from the obscurity of the early nineties. His answer was explicit, it was calculated, and he made it quite clear that he spoke only for himself.

"If by Home Rule is meant, as I suppose it is, the introduction of a Bill for the establishment of a legislature in Dublin, as I have said before and will say again, I am of opinion, speaking for myself, that it will not and cannot be a part of the policy of the next Liberal Government."

He said, however, that he must add that he had not, in spirit or in letter, gone back on Mr. Gladstone's policy. The first of these statements was obviously an intimation to the leader of the party in the House of Commons, that if the latter should be called upon to form a Government he must either refuse to put Home

Rule into the programme or do without the assistance of the member for East Fife. The second statement was presumably intended to reassure the leader, should the first remark lead him to doubt the enduring quality of Mr. Asquith's Liberal convictions.

In all his speeches at this time he vehemently asserted the fact that the issues were Free Trade *v.* Protection, and the repeal of Tory class-legislation.

In December Mr. Balfour resigned.

CHAPTER X

THE GENERAL ELECTION, 1906

MR. BALFOUR'S departure set in motion the acrobatics of nomination. The partisan was now rampant. Every man who bought a morning paper appeared to purchase also the right to form the new Administration. It is probable, indeed, that a summons to Buckingham Palace would have not greatly surprised those who most loudly proclaimed the right to office of some favourite, but not necessarily eminent, politician. The newspapers fanned lustily the fires of speculation. The ubiquitous Press photographer—that last flower of the soil of public curiosity—contributed daily some new bud from an unfailing supply. The personal paragraph became an unquenchable tongue uttering forecasts, sometimes almost imposing upon the Prime Minister a particular conclusion. One enterprising journal of the Liberal colour offered a hundred pounds for the best anticipation of the new appointments. The early morning railway trains became so many courts of adjudication, the claims of candidates being looked into with much nicety and with every consideration of the known antecedent. Everybody had his own idea of what portfolio best fitted a particular individual, and while the round peg as often went into the square hole as the round hole secured the square peg, the

manipulator got huge satisfaction in his work. Cabinet-making became a general practice. The art was found being practised in drawing-rooms as well as clubs, in omnibuses as well as coal mines. Everybody had his own idea for a suitable Home Secretary, and there was no one but was ready then and there to present the Exchequer seals to some happy politician who had touched his imagination.

But though everyone had ideas, though the whole country arrived at conclusions, a good deal of the speculation was decidedly vague. It was fourteen years since a Liberal Ministry had been called together, and many of the supreme personalities of that earlier day had died or—so frail is Parliamentary reputation—faded from the public mind. Moreover, there were a number of able men whose names opposition to the Chamberlain fiscal campaign, opposition to the Education Act, and opposition to the last performances of the Balfourian Government, had forced to the front. That some of these men would be found in the new Cabinet and the new Administration nobody questioned. That there would have to be made certain sacrifices not only amongst these, but amongst those who had served well their party and their generation, could also not be doubted.

But three or four figures stood out as those of certain inclusions. Among the men certain of place who had never before held office were Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Churchill. Among former office-holders was Mr. Asquith. Without his support it would be almost impossible for the Government to maintain existence. If he declined to come in, the

Liberal party could only be a thing divided, the appeal to the country would be weakened, and an actual danger of defeat would be precipitated.

It was now twelve years since Mr. Asquith had handed over the seals of office to a Conservative successor. Since then his influence in the country had been a growing one. True, the Radical section of the party believed that he had sometimes tarried a little in the shadow of Lord Rosebery. But those who knew him trusted him wholly. And in 1903 Mr. Chamberlain had appeared with his fiscal panacea for all our commercial distresses. To expose the Birmingham fallacies had at once been Mr. Asquith's work. He had fallen to the task with, from the first, a splendid determination. By so doing he had more than regained his old sway in the party, and the December of 1906 found him with a following amongst Liberals only second to that of the Prime Minister.

It was believed that his adherence to the new Government had been secured. "C. B.'s" greatest difficulty was known to centre in Sir Edward Grey. But Mr. Asquith's adherence being taken for granted, there still remained the question for which of the great offices of State would he elect. It was not to be supposed that in his position he would be offered a particular portfolio. No one doubted but that he would be invited to make his choice from every office in the Cabinet.

There was not much disposition to think that he would choose to be Lord Chancellor. For the Woolsack—though it carries with it an excellent financial recompense and an illimitable popularity

born of the fact that it dispenses a lavish patronage—has never in recent Cabinets been anything but a subordinate position. The holder lives in an atmosphere of blameless and non-political activities, a splendid figure, splendidly isolated from the movements and the passions, the ambitions and the hopes, of the country upon which, from his great height, he looks down. The Woolsack was not likely, then, to be the choice of a man who had lived his political life in close touch with crowds, and who had tasted something at least of the sweetness of popular applause. That Mr. Asquith would consent or be desired by the Prime Minister to take the office he had held in the last Liberal Administration was unlikely. While it is true, of course, that every office depends for its importance to some extent upon the personality of the man who holds it, Mr. Asquith could not be spared to the Home Department.

His knowledge of men and affairs, his strength of character and his force of will, above all his perfect self-control, well fitted him to be the successor to Lord Lansdowne. He had enjoyed for many years the close personal friendship of one who made his only genuine success in the sphere of foreign politics. But if Mr. Asquith were to go to the Foreign Office he would be keeping out one still better qualified for that great situation. Sir Edward Grey, in any other position, was not to be considered. Where, then, would Mr. Asquith go?

Thus speculation continued. But the most general assumption was that he would choose the Chancellorship of the Exchequer. This post is generally considered

to rank next to that of the Premiership, for when the latter happens to be held by a peer, the Chancellor usually couples with his office the leadership of the House of Commons. Against this may be put the fact that Mr. Balfour, in the years before he succeeded Lord Salisbury, led the Commons without being Chancellor.

It is now history that the expectation that Mr. Asquith would go to the Exchequer was verified. The appointment gave universal satisfaction and was applauded by both parties. The Liberals saw in his accession to office the final blow to party faction, while the Conservatives were pleased because they recognized in the new Chancellor a moderating influence which would check the unwise and violent legislation which they feared might be promoted by some of the new political forces.

The Department of the Exchequer is one of the greatest offices in the State. And as such it was certain to excite the honourable desire of any ambitious statesman worthy of the name.

But the Chancellorship, while it must always attract the hopes of statesmen of both sides of the House of Commons, exercises in Liberal minds a feeling at once of attraction and awe. For no Liberal can approach its chair without seeing in it for a moment a ghostly figure whose massive head bends over ghostly figures of distant bygone Budgets, and who seems as though into them even now he must press some vitality. It is a great destiny to sit where Gladstone sat.

If Mr. Asquith hesitated, he hesitated only in his heart. He showed no feeling. It was not his way.

He went to his new great office and set at once to master his work.

The Cabinet appointments were made in December. In January the new Government sought the country's approval. To recall that terrible destruction of Tory hopes is to recall what is still fresh in the public mind. But never before in the whole history of politics had there been witnessed such a complete revolution in public sentiment as was seen in those first weeks of a new year. Nobody seemed safe if he wore Conservative colours. The introduction of Chinese labour in South African mines touched the easily active imagination of the working man, and turned him from a Tory to a Liberal. The picture of the "Tory British workman" — being a sketch of a pig-tailed son of the Celestial Empire—appeared upon many hoardings and helped to impress the minds of the doubters. But what wrought most with the thoughtful voter—that happy conjunction of adjective and noun—was the danger that threatened the great commercial institution bequeathed to the country by Cobden and Peel. Memories were not as good as they had been, but there were still men who could remember the old days when bread was almost a luxury, and when a Protective tariff could laugh hideously at the skeletons of the men whom it had killed. Lifelong Conservatives announced themselves to be Free Traders, and went to the poll with the single object of crushing the insidious re-growth of the weed Protection.

The first constituency to be polled was a midland one, and the overwhelming Free Trade victory there

recorded struck the note which was to dominate the whole piece. This was on Thursday. Then came Saturday—and Manchester. What Lancashire thinks to-day England will think to-morrow, is a political epigram which has been enunciated to the point of weariness. Yet it was upon many tongues and in many minds that night. The surging throngs which gathered round the lantern slides in Fleet Street as the night closed in waited expectant of something vague and strange. Hearts of stout Tories trembled for something they scarce realised. Then the first results began to come through. And at last straining eyes read the downfall of Conservatism in the rejection of Mr. Balfour in East Manchester.

Here was something for which to cheer. Even the Conservative thousands who helped to fill the streets must have found something admirable in the very magnitude of their defeat. London went home that night with no further doubt of how the struggle was to go. Lancashire had spoken. To-morrow—but for the intervention of Sunday the literal to-morrow—saw England repeating Lancashire in a manner wholly satisfactory to the saying.

In the meantime ministers were flinging themselves into the struggle with a courage born not only of Liberal success, but of their suddenly acquired dominance in their own party. A man is never so confident as when the victory is within his grasp but not yet actually in his hand. Afterwards, when the first moment of supremacy is passed, there may come doubts of the permanence of the triumph. But this first moment is as sweet as anything known to the man

who lives his days in the turmoil of party. This was the happy experience of many Liberals at this time. A few, of course, had that other special felicity, which fourteen years before Mr. Asquith had himself enjoyed, of finding themselves no longer private members, docile creatures of a governing Whip, but Front Bench men. But though that particular sweet Mr. Asquith had already tasted, it is to be remembered that not only had twelve years passed since he had sat at the table of the Cabinet, but that his whole official experience had not exceeded three years.

It was he who began to prepare the country for the election. He was one of the first of the new ministers to appear on the platform. He spoke at the Queen's Hall on December 20th, and told his audience that the election was to be fought on Free Trade. He had already given the nation the arguments at length: he now summarised them and asked for a verdict. The speech was significant, however, not so much for its references to the Fiscal question, as for two other features. The first of these was a remark about Ireland; the second was, not a remark, but the omission of one. The reference to Ireland was designed to emphasise the fact that the election was not being fought on Home Rule—as Mr. Balfour tried to suggest. But this utterance was not projected by the speaker only or chiefly at Mr. Balfour. It was aimed at those on his own side who might later claim the right to bring in a Home Rule Bill.

The omission was that of any denunciation of Chinese labour. In this part of Liberal propaganda he was disinclined to engage. The refusal will easily be seen to

have been characteristic. The question was undoubtedly one of the most urgent before the country—on moral as well as economic grounds. But it was the kind of question which, in the hands of the clever party manager, could be worked in other than reasonable ways. The more obvious of its economic aspects—nothing was to be got out of the moral, of which most people were ignorant—could easily be used to move popular passion. The Chinaman was driving the Englishman out of the South African labour market. It was easy to call him the “Tory British workman.”

Mr. Asquith, however, was impatient of such methods. Appeals, he felt, ought to be to reason. His career has never been other than consistent with his temperament ; the secret of all his political actions is to be found in his personal characteristics. There has, perhaps, been no statesman who has occasioned more rarely a shock of surprise to those who know his instinctive attitude towards life and politics. But no part of his history more closely consists with his peculiar qualities than the position he took up in excluding from his speeches the subject of indentured labour.

He refused to be carried in upon a sea of popular passion. This independence may seem rash until examined. But he was moved by something more than a mere dislike of popular verdicts gained by an appeal to prejudice. And his chief reason for wishing to put the indentured question in the background was to give complete prominence to the Fiscal question. He believed the election should be fought for Free Trade in order that the verdict, one way or another, should be decisive on this one issue. He would not diffuse his own quality.

But neither would he diffuse the value of an electoral decision.

But he had another object in ignoring Chinese labour. He believed that not only ought Free Trade to be the dominating issue, but that it quite sufficed—so great was the country's belief in its existing fiscal system—to win the election.

The third reason was that he realised, as not everyone did, that the more vulgar side of the agitation would recoil upon its promoters' heads. Another of his motives was his doubt of the practicability, now that indentured labour was in force, of ending it—at any rate immediately. One of the best features of his career has been his refusal to give promises unless he saw their fulfilment in sight. Like Macaulay, he has never been fond of pledges.

He may also have had a feeling that if he emphasised again and again his repudiation of a part of the Conservative policy in South Africa of which he did not approve, it might be construed into a repudiation of that part of Tory policy to which he had given his support. Indentured labour was an excrescence of Imperialism, but since he had voiced his approval of some recent acts of Imperial policy he may have felt that, in too frequently condemning the excrescence, it might be said that he was also condemning the acts by means of which it had attained its being.

There never was any doubt of his hatred of indentured labour.¹ But his exclusion of it from all his platform

¹ "You are, by this ordinance, putting in jeopardy the whole future of South Africa." Mr. Asquith, in House of Commons,

addresses, an exclusion which characterised practically the whole of his election speeches, is, for the reasons already stated, to be considered a part of the man.

He was one of the first to address a meeting after the Christmas holidays, appearing at Sheffield on January 5th. He said the issue was whether or not the Government which had disappeared, should be called back and given a Protectionist mandate. He referred to the financial condition of the country and his hopes of improving it. But he concentrated on Free Trade. He spoke at Huddersfield four days later, and welcomed the appearance of the Labour candidates. He told the Labour party that already the Government was trying to deal, in a Bill, with the question of trades disputes. He expressed hopes of improving the existing Workmen's Compensation Act, and said that in education lay the best cure of unemployment. "We should mix more brains with our work." Finally, he laid the strongest emphasis on the danger threatened to Free Trade.

The next day he went to Stockton to support the candidature of Mr. S. F. Mendl, and spoke on labour questions and the Trades Disputes Bill. "Speaking as one who was lately a lawyer, I may say that it passes the wit of man to devise a scheme by which a strike or any other legitimate industrial combination can be legally conducted." But once again the greater part of his speech was a defence of Free Trade.

On the 16th he went to Oakham and proclaimed Free Trade and plain dealing in public affairs as the March 21st, 1904. He had also supported the vote of censure moved on February 22nd of the same year.

issues of the election. He took occasion also to deplore the death of Lord Ritchie,¹ "that manly, upright, courteous statesman."

Three days later he appeared at Henley to support Mr. Philip Morrell. He again welcomed the Labour members, and said that the Government's first care should be education, and once more he laid particular emphasis on the danger threatening Free Trade.

The next day he went north, and after a long and tiring journey addressed a meeting at St. Andrews. His endurance is shown by the fact that, having spoken at the meeting on the 19th at Henley, he spent the whole of the next day in the train, and went straight from the railway carriage to the platform. The students of the local University contrived to make their presence felt. The speech followed the lines of the previous ones. He bantered the retiring Prime Minister upon his failure to frighten the country about Home Rule. "You know those air balloons we sometimes see in the hands of children. They are very graceful and pretty, and are buoyant so long as they are not pricked, but the smallest pin-prick destroys them utterly. And this is the case with the Home Rule balloon. The late Prime Minister was, I see, at Inverness last night, engaged in trying to pump a little new gas into it. It is in vain!"

He denied there was any agreement between the Liberals and the Irish. He again welcomed the Labour members, and said every opinion ought to

¹ Lord Ritchie, it is interesting to note, was, like Mr. Asquith, an old City of London schoolboy who became Chancellor of the Exchequer.

be represented, denied that politics could long continue to be the affair of two parties only, and turned to the Fiscal question. He did not want to see a self-contained Empire. It was not his ideal that the Empire should be surrounded by a wall of tariffs. But though the constituencies echoed with the cries of "Tory British workman" and "pig-tail," he avoided the subject.

The St. Andrews meeting was really the opening of his own campaign. The East Fife election was to take place on the 26th. By this time of course he knew that a great victory, an unprecedented triumph, was to be his party's.

At Leven he spoke wholly on Free Trade. At Kingsbarn he asked the people to give the new Government the strongest possible evidence of popular welcome and approval. He warned them not to think, because of the victory already assured for Free Trade, that Protection was done with. The wisdom of the warning is becoming apparent to-day. Heckled—he was often heckled—he said that he would support small holdings.

The next day he went to Auchtermuchty and Newburgh. At the former he poked fun at the Socialism scare. Referring to a subject of which he had often spoken before, he denied that he had calumniated Mr. Chamberlain by saying the latter was going to tax raw materials. He quoted again his well-known instance of the imposition of a duty on South African wool, to satisfy that Colony when it saw Canada benefiting from a duty on wheat. In reply to heckling, he said Parliament had no mandate for Home Rule,

and that if a Bill was introduced he would not support it.

On the 25th at Galdry he told his audience to remember that when, next day, they gave their votes, they owed their enfranchisement to the Liberal party. The speech dealt chiefly with Free Trade. "I am not a Free Trader because Cobden was one. I would have been a Free Trader, I hope, although Cobden had never lived." He referred to the condition of the country's finances, and said that, when they had reduced the Debt, they would be able to relieve the enormous burden pressing on the country.

A heckler at this point interrupted: "You speak of the necessity of reducing taxation. Would you be in favour of reducing a Cabinet Minister's pay?"

"Certainly not," was his emphatic answer.

"Do you consider any gentleman filling such a position worth £5,000?"

"I do."

Up to this time he had still avoided all reference to the question which occupied so much of the public mind. At last, however, the inevitable heckler drew him. He was asked if he would renew the indentures of the Chinese. He answered readily enough that the Transvaal would soon have a Government of its own and could decide for itself.

"The right honourable gentleman knows that the Chinese are necessary."

"I know nothing of the kind."

He had held to the course he had set himself with his accustomed tenacity. He had believed—and events have since absolutely upheld him—that the lesson of

the election, when afterwards it came to be drawn as in favour of Free Trade, would be found to have lost something of its value if another question than that of Fiscal Reform was allowed to dominate the issue before the country. He was still appealing to the logic rather than to the passions of the nation.

In his insistence that Free Trade was seriously threatened, he showed a true understanding, and in warning the country that the danger was not over with the attainment of the victory, he showed true foresight. The fact that in some constituencies the election to a large extent was fought on the subject of Indentured Labour has enabled the opponents of Free Trade to suggest that a clear verdict on the Fiscal question has not yet been given. The value of the last general election to Free Trade has been largely lost, as Mr. Asquith saw it would be, by the confusion of the issues involved. To say this is not to deny that in many respects the Chinese question was of a character more important than Free Trade itself.

When the last constituency had been polled it was seen that, of the few Conservative members who still had the right to sit, not one represented Wales and very few Scotland. Great Liberal minorities in England had been turned into greater majorities, and a Tory seat in Essex was won by a Radical by a margin of eight thousand votes. Scarcely a Conservative gain came to break the ceaseless monotony of Liberal victories. Defeat became a habit. It seemed as though scarcely a Tory possession was safe. And when it was all over and gains and losses had been reckoned up,

it was found that the final result worked out as follows :—

Liberals and Labour	.	.	429
Conservatives and Unionists	.	.	158
Nationalists	.	.	83

Majority of parties for Reform 354

To gain the victory Mr. Asquith had done his part. But his duties were not now only those of the platform. The Department which he was to control demanded his attention, and before many days had passed he had returned to Whitehall; at the Exchequer he had set himself at once to master every detail of his new work. To do that in a great State Department is to answer a severe test. Unlike the late Lord Ritchie, unlike Lord Goschen, he was not a financier. With large financial operations, whether at the Home Department or elsewhere, he had never been called upon officially to deal. But he had a bright and recent example in Sir William Harcourt, whose early training had been a legal one, and who, when he first joined the Cabinet, did so by taking the chair of a Department so essentially legal in atmosphere as the Home Office.

Yet while the Exchequer called for an instinct for figures, and for a knowledge of that strange world or mingling and opposing interests which we call the City, which only a few men could be expected to possess, it called for something more. The Chancellor of the Exchequer must be not merely a man acquainted with business forms and familiar with the terms and transactions of commerce, must not only comprehend

the science of investment and the difference between a debenture and a preference, but first of all—and this must never be forgotten—he must be a statesman. There were hundreds of contemporaries of Mr. Gladstone probably with a closer familiarity with City movements than was possessed even by that abnormally endowed and widely intelligent intellect. Yet, which of them could have handled figures as he handled them or clothed them with romance as he clothed them? The first essential of a Chancellor is not business knowledge. It is statesmanship. Let this be recollected by those who call too loudly for “business methods” in the conduct of the country.

When a certain well-known statesman was appointed Colonial Secretary, he is said to have called aside an official, and with a naïve invitation to confidence, observed: “By the way, where *are* the Colonies?” This story has often been told, but always to emphasise the same moral—that knowledge is the first essential. But the *ignoramus* referred to was a greater minister than the men who, because of their superior information, might have been appointed to the place he filled. For he was—using the word in its proper and narrow sense—a statesman. A knowledge of details the permanent official is able to provide; instruction may proceed from the same quarter. But true statecraft cannot be acquired in a few easy lessons. An instinct for it must be inherent. The instinct may have to wait until opportunity provides a day of awakening, but it must be there.

Lord Randolph Churchill was generally admitted to have performed the duties of Secretary for India, not only

adequately, but admirably. Yet on one occasion when Bimetallism was to come under discussion in the India Council, he observed: "I have asked Arthur Balfour to come here to-day. He understands these things, whereas I know no more about them than a goat." A statesman does not so much need to carry in his head a large number of details, as to know how to deal with such details when they are placed before him.

Mr. Asquith had long before proved himself a statesman of the highest capacity. Moreover, he had, so far as it was possible for one to have, who while in close touch for many years with Chancellors and ex-Chancellors, had yet never been connected officially with the Treasury—a sound knowledge of British finance. Added to this, his recent labours in apology for Free Trade had familiarised him still more closely with the fiscal problem, and with the best methods for its exposition. A happier appointment could scarcely have been made.

That the new Chancellor was determined to learn his work, the permanent officials soon discovered.

The permanent official, it is sometimes forgotten, is often not merely a drudge, not only a man, but a personality. Some of these splendidly trained intellects who overlook and sometimes, it must be confessed, rectify the mistakes of Cabinet ministers, are better qualified for political distinction than the man who has been thrown into the chair from which they are compelled to take their orders. They are often men with intuitions. They measure their new chiefs by no special standards, and they know whether they are

going to work with a man who will depend upon them at every turn, or one who will expect them to teach him quickly to be independent.

Mr. Asquith came to the officials of the Exchequer with a reputation. But they soon discovered that they were to witness that reputation strengthen and improve.

The Chancellor, on the other hand, was finding his work full of splendid possibilities, and looked forward to a six years' tenure of his new and great office.

CHAPTER XI

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

THE work done by Mr. Asquith at the Exchequer has been sound rather than brilliant. This has been so, however, because he has preferred soundness to brilliancy, and has made no effort to touch the imagination by his handling of figures and adjustment of the country's finances. This preference is the result partly of the existence in his character of certain traits well known and inherent. His policy, however, is not only the natural consequence of his type of mind, but has been deliberately adapted to what he saw were the needs of the moment. It is natural for him to move cautiously even when there are no clouds over the path of national finance; but just now there were many clouds. It is not difficult for him to refrain from "showing off" as a manipulator of public moneys; he has no impulse urging him to do so. It is easy for him to deal with figures as he deals with human factors—in an unhurried, assured, unemotional way. But now he saw that the truer he remained to his inborn instinct, the more he suppressed emotion, the colder and calmer and less responsive he continued, the better would be his service to the country. The most ostentatiously - inclined Chancellor in the history of the Exchequer could scarcely have failed to see that this was no time for

popular display. "C.-B." made some good appointments; but though Mr. Asquith's to the Chancellorship was inevitable on other grounds than suitability, the late Prime Minister could not have found anyone, the particular character of whose capacity was better adapted to the needs of the moment. Another politician might have been more suited to another time, but at this juncture there was no one in the country who could be expected to discharge the unpleasant duty which would devolve upon the Chancellor as well as Mr. Asquith.

The condition of the national finances must be remembered before the importance of the appointment can be understood. For the past ten years the country had been acquiring liabilities at such a rate as to lower, to an appallingly serious extent, British credit. The funded and unfunded Debt from being £641,000,000 in March, 1897, would at the end of the financial year be £744,000,000. Moreover, while the debt on other capital liabilities in the Diamond Jubilee year was only £4,000,000, in the spring of 1906 it would be £47,000,000. The chief responsibility for this abnormal increase rests with the war. But the war makers had not had the courage to clap on enough direct taxation to reduce the need of borrowing. The public which prances, eyes flashing, into the whirl of conflict does not like afterwards to be called upon to pay promptly and directly for its amusement. The Conservative Government, therefore, who had provided the diversion, had felt itself forced, in view of the unwillingness of its clients to pay its just dues, to resort to other and less financially excellent methods of meeting the difficulties

which faced it. Its attitude towards the critics was a mixture of happy irresponsibility and splendid resignation under an inevitable financial burden.

The appointment of Mr. Asquith resembled the putting in of an auditor to examine the affairs of a business which had been allowed a loose hand for a number of years. Like that ever unwelcome inquisitor, he had to examine the accounts and say what he found. He had to tell the truth. That, when he came to tell it, it would be unpalatable truth he knew. But he regarded the task with no hesitancy, and discharged it without waste of time. In communicating the unpleasant facts, he showed no particular diffidence. He drove the truth home on every possible occasion, both before and after the election. He told the country that it had been a spendthrift, that it was suffering for its folly, and that before it had finished it must suffer a little more. It was all very well to talk of reducing taxation. To reduce taxation was an excellent thing. "There is no dream more dear to a Chancellor of the Exchequer than the vision of reducing taxation, and if ever there was a time when that dream might be supposed to burn with exceptional ardour it is now."¹ But it was not time to talk of reducing taxation until the debt had been reduced. If he pointed out the faults and follies of his predecessors with a little complacency, it is not very wonderful. Some feeling of the kind he probably could not avoid. Had he been called upon to follow some phenomenal example of efficiency, his comparative success might have been in doubt. But he had the assurance that even if he failed to

¹ Sheffield, January 5th.

improve the condition of the country's finances, it was not possible for him, unless by some diligence in folly, to make them much worse. For Mr. A. Chamberlain, his predecessor, it has to be said that the blame rested not upon an individual, but had to be shared between each of those who had shaped Tory policy and methods during the preceding ten years.

If Mr. Asquith had on the one hand a reason for complacency in the thought that his reputation as a financier had not much to fear in any comparison which the country might institute between himself and his immediate predecessors, he could not, on the other hand, forget the undoubted fact that the nation is never very careful in its allocation of blame, and often forgets, in its annoyance with the statesman who asks it to pay a bill, that it was another person who led it into contracting the debt. He knew that it was hoping for an immediate reduction in income tax, as well as for the abolition of the tea, sugar, and coal imposts. He was aware that the ordinary tax-payer, when a call is made upon his immediate resources, is not greatly perturbed about British credit, and that to this person the National Debt is a term, as vague as it is convenient, which covers certain financial liabilities completely remote from his own personal concerns. He knew that the country looked to him to remove these taxes at an early date, and that it would not readily accept the excuse that the condition in which the previous Government had left the public credit made it impossible for any prudent Chancellor to yield to the tax-payers' wishes.

So much for his attitude as a politician towards his

new responsibilities. He had another feeling which was quite unrelated either to public opinion or national prejudice. He had a strong impression of the principles which he believed should form the basis of national financial policy. But he found little sign of these principles in the policy which had been left him by his predecessors. His concern at what he saw was quite genuine. It was naturally not wholly free from party bias; to express it, as he did frequently to the country before and after the election, was useful to the Liberal cause. But his instinct for sound finance made him genuinely ill at ease. He was a financier as well as a Liberal leader. And in his first Budget speech he spoke, not of his disgust at Conservative incompetence, but of his "disquiet" at the condition of the national credit.

His instinctive honesty as well as his indifference to the prejudices of the commoner type of political intelligence, showed itself in his undisguised refusal, before the election, to consider for a moment the question of reducing taxation. He made no bid for popularity by talk about the end of the reign of extortion, or about the coming of the emancipators with hammers to break the chains of taxation which hung upon the country's wrists. You must, he told them with hearty frankness, go on paying. He did not say this once only, as he might have done if his object had been merely to cover himself against any allegation which might be made later, that he had promised to reduce the burden. From almost every platform on which he appeared he reiterated his refusal of reduction. He gave a hope that he would drop the coal duty, which he said was vicious in principle, but that was all.

It might be possible to praise him for his courage were it not that it was of the kind which is indifferent to danger. There was nothing calculated to excite enthusiasm in the statement, to a mass meeting in Sheffield, that "there can be no reduction of taxation except on two conditions. First, the reduction of the normal expenditure of the country; but there can be no prospect of that this year, because of the estimates I have inherited. The second condition is that a due regard be had to strengthening and enlarging the provision for the redemption of the capital liabilities of the State." The men who listened may have approved the soundness of the observations. They could hardly be what Mr. Lucy would call "ungovernably enthusiastic." Mr. Asquith was, as a matter of fact, going about distributing wholesome but not very palatable medicine. For the work no one was better qualified than he. His appearance at Sheffield was his first in the New Year and, more important, his first after ascertaining something of what his immediate duties as a national financier would be. A week later he was in Perth. "Have you realised," he asked his hearers, "that during the past ten years the annual normal expenditure has increased between forty and fifty millions? Do you know you are paying £24,500,000 of taxation every year into the Exchequer more than you were doing some years ago?" Then came the homely truth: "I tell you perfectly frankly that it is impossible to hope for any remission of taxation of any sort or kind, until you have reduced the level of expenditure at present prevailing in the country, and until you have made, as it is my intention and hope that I shall make, a better

and a more adequate provision for the redemption of the National Debt."

In his own constituency, where he appeared later in the month, he told the people, with a reiteration almost as monotonous as the record of Liberal victories, to hope for no reduction in their taxes. "I can make no reduction until the national expenditure has been reduced to its proper level." "The first duty of any prudent statesman at the present time," he said at Newport the day before his election, "is to strengthen the national credit."

This crusade against debt brings into prominence the strongest characteristic of Mr. Asquith's financial policy. That characteristic is thrift. If it is said that he endangered his reputation for this admirable quality by giving Old Age Pensions before he knew where the money was to come from, he would probably reply that the money can be found. He has never shown any objection to raising revenue,¹ and while he does not greatly fear the unpopularity which might come to him by certain direct taxes, he knows that there are many new channels of taxation which have not been tried. He has always held strong views in favour of the taxation of site values, and he is perfectly ready to mulct the unearned income for the benefit of the impoverished. What he will not have at any price, what he set his face against from the first moment of his entering the Exchequer, is a loan. His objection to the policy of borrowing shows itself at

¹ "There cannot be a greater mistake than to suppose that a Free Trade minister has come or even approached towards the end of his resources in the matter of taxes." Mr. Asquith's Budget Statement, 1908.

all times, and not only in matters directly related to the Exchequer. His first Budget, which he brought in in May, 1906, might, if printed in pamphlet form, be accepted as a treatise on national thrift.

He gave the House a sketch of how the country's credit was involved. "These figures," he went on, "speak with an eloquence which needs no rhetorical embroidery, and, in my opinion, to make a return to more thrifty and economical methods of administration is the first and paramount duty of the Government."

He would have no more borrowing for naval and military works. Borrowings under the still unexhausted powers of the existing Acts were, as a rule, to be confined for the future to the continuation and completion of works already in hand. "Apart from the Suez Canal shares and our balances in the bank, there are no countervailing assets, with the exception—a not altogether negligible exception—of the British Empire, which, as we always realise on Budget nights, has been, to a very large degree, built upon borrowed money." The pleasantry did not hide the note of complete dissatisfaction with the fact that he was forced to admit these borrowings.

"The Unfunded Debt," he went on, "was to him a source of the most serious disquietude." This disquiet was natural. The Unfunded Debt had grown in nine years to eleven times the amount at which it stood at the beginning of this period. The terminable annuities account would be reduced that year by £1,846,280. He would not set up fresh ones, but would apply the money set free to the reduction of debt as he saw fit.

The surplus of £3,466,000 went as the Act directed,

to Debt reduction. He proposed for his estimated surplus to devote another half million to the same purpose. As was expected, he took off the coal tax. He also took a penny off tea.

His first Budget, when its details became known, excited no enthusiasm. It was not intended to do so Mr. Chamberlain called it humdrum, but admitted that, applied to a Liberal statement, the term was one of praise. It was as a Budget less rigid than might have been expected from its author's January speeches. But the City was satisfied. It recognised that the Chancellor's hands were tied, and that he could not yet carry out all his intentions for improving national credit.

The second Budget was a more ambitious affair. He had promised to deal with the income tax. And in this, his second year as Chancellor, he allowed a rebate of threepence off earned incomes of £2,000 and under. That was the great popular feature of his statement. It cost him two millions. This sum, however, was all he would allow for popular financial luxuries. And even this he did not consider as wholly devoted to the purchase of a luxury. A high income tax weakens the country's reserve strength. To reduce the income tax was, therefore, part of his original policy for putting the nation's finances on a safe basis. His other large outlay was what was to be expected. One million and a half was to go to reduce the Debt. But he significantly added that next year this sum would be employed for Old Age Pensions.

He had been examining the workings of the system, over which he had been called to preside, with a good deal of impatience. He was determined, not

only to improve the country's financial position, but its methods of collecting its cash. Accordingly he forecasted a new arrangement regarding money intercepted for the Exchequer and handed over to the local authorities. He would have liked to tax—as it had been suggested he should do—motor cars. He referred to the matter in terms which give a good idea of his direct style of address.

“I think a tax on motor cars is almost an ideal tax, because it is a tax on a luxury which is apt to degenerate into a nuisance. But it is no good, so long as this [then existing] system prevails, for me or for anybody else to put an additional duty on motor cars, for where does the duty go to? It goes to the local authority by whom these duties are collected—that is to say, as a rule, the local authority within whose area the person resides to whom the motor car belongs. Suppose I pay under a new addition to the motor duty, as I should pay here in London, an extra duty on my motor car, the benefit of it goes entirely to the London County Council. But it is not the streets and roads of London that my motor car does injure, it is the rural districts of England and Scotland. Nothing can be more illogical or unjust than that distribution of the matter.”

He went on to complain, upon the same ground, of the system in vogue in regard to licensing duties. At the time he used it, the phrase “licence duty” carried with it a less sinister suggestiveness than it bears for some people to-day.

“Take,” said the Chancellor, “the duty on the licences of public-houses. I wish to have my hands set free in this matter also. At present the proceeds

of those duties go to the Local Taxation account, and there, again, they go to the local authorities in proportion to the number of licences which are taken out in their respective areas. You could not possibly have a system better calculated to put a premium on a lethargic and non-public-spirited licensing authority."

It will be seen that he was trying to relate national finance to national social problems. Chancellors are not always ready or able to do this.

The third Budget was anticipated with a great deal of interest. Old age pensions had been promised. So had a reduction of the sugar duty. A Free Trade Government which had been in power for three years and had yet allowed the persistence of such a tax on raw material was in danger of being accused of inconsistency. He made his statement on May 7th, speaking for two and a half hours in a manner described as lucid. He began, as well he might do, in a very optimistic vein. Trade returns were highly satisfactory, and were likely to continue so. He then alluded to that reform in Exchequer arrangements for the collection of moneys, which he had forecasted in his previous speech. The Budget of 1907 was based on a system under which a portion of the revenue raised by Imperial offices was not paid into the Exchequer, but handed over direct to the Local Taxation account. "But," he said, proudly, "the Exchequer accounts for 1907-8 contain a complete record of the transactions both on the receipt and on the issue side." He expressed satisfaction with the working of the income tax collection as newly constituted, and turned to the subject of debt. That year they had reduced the Funded Debt by £6,319,000,

terminable annuities had been reduced by £1,457,000, and the Unfunded Debt (including the War Loan) by £10,254,000. "So that the capital of the National Debt at the end of the financial year, as compared with the beginning, showed a reduction of £18,000,000—a reduction wholly without precedent." The complacency was not unnatural. But the ground for it had not yet all been shown. "By the 31st March, 1909, we shall have paid off nearly £47,000,000 of National Debt. We shall have reduced the aggregate capital liabilities of the nation by £41,000,000; we shall have saved in annual interest nearly £1,250,000, and we shall have brought back the capital of the National Debt, notwithstanding the South African war and all the other various sources of liability which have arisen, to almost exactly the same figure at which it stood in 1889—twenty years ago."

That was a record of which any Chancellor might be proud. Then came the plans devised for granting old age pensions of five shillings weekly to persons over seventy with incomes under ten shillings a week, and the reduction by one farthing per pound of the sugar duty.

His last was certainly Mr. Asquith's most remarkable Budget, and while it has many of his characteristics, it has features, beside the obvious one of the arrangement for old age pensions, which indicate some independence of his earlier dogmatic thrift. The suggestion in his speech most startling to preconceived notions of his psychology was his hint that the time had come when it might be possible to slacken the reduction of debt and to lower the Sinking Fund, in order to meet part of the old age pensions charge. He was entitled to suggest this

by the fact that he had, since coming to the Exchequer, paid off debt with unprecedented rapidity. But it prompts the taking of a new impression of his character.

Surveying the work done by Mr. Asquith as Chancellor, the reader will doubtless re-echo the view put forward, that it is before everything sound. It is free from jugglery ; it shows that the mind at work is full of just those qualities of tenacity and discretion which have informed it in all its efforts, whether at school and the University, or in life and politics. Mr. Asquith went to the Exchequer to perform a task greatly needed to be done, and a task which was bound to tax the powers of the man called to perform it. He showed himself from the first not only thoroughly well qualified for the duties which devolved upon the Chancellor, but for those which fell upon the Chancellor appointed at this particular juncture in the financial history of the nation. He brought to his work a business mind which no more disguised impatience of slovenly financial methods than it had done when brought in contact with ill-wrought methods at the Home Office. This anxious business intelligence is shown, not only in the reform of the old system whereby Exchequer accounts were confused with local taxation, but in the transfer of the Excise Department from the Inland Revenue to the Customs. Whenever he saw an opportunity of tightening the system on which the country's business is done he took it. He was determined to be efficient, to make the Treasury efficient.

Efficiency demanded as his first and paramount duty not merely reductions, but enormous reductions of debt. And while it is true that he founded the old age pension

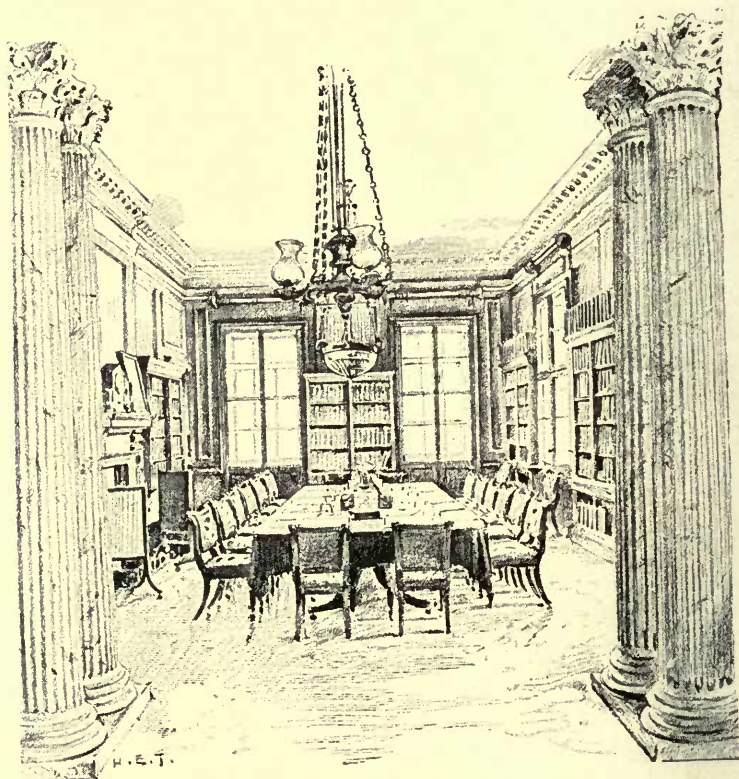
system in this country, perhaps his greatest claim to reputation for his work at the Exchequer rests on the lesson he taught of national thrift.

He told the country that while other nations met their difficulties by borrowing, and borrowing on terms not always advantageous, Englishmen did not need to resort to such means, and that therefore he would not let them. But he did not forget to praise them warmly for the admirable meekness with which they submitted to their many burdens.

His attitude towards the Debt is the best test of the financial virtue of a Chancellor. If he inclines immediately to lay interfering hands upon the Sinking Fund he may be regarded with suspicion. He is trying to buy popularity at the price of the national credit. But if, when Debt has been reduced with unprecedented rapidity, he says it is time to consider whether there may not now be a slackening of reduction in favour of allowing a little more ease to the burdened country, he has legitimate grounds for his action. It is true that at the same moment that Mr. Asquith suggested it was time to lighten the burden he was also proposing to increase it. But the increase was one for which the country would certainly not blame him. The granting of old age pensions was felt on all hands to be right and reasonable. In proposing that Debt reduction should proceed at a slower pace, in order to liberate more money for pensions, Mr. Asquith will certainly not be criticised in the country. But the proposal cannot by him be regarded as wholly satisfactory finance. When Sir Stafford Northcote inaugurated his Sinking Fund, making it an annual charge of

twenty-eight millions, he calculated that by 1930, barring wars and other causes, the Debt would be paid off. It is true that there never was any hope that the calculation could be more than a paper one. But it is the kind of finance after the heart of Mr. Asquith. And it is the best proof of his humanity and of his sympathy for the workers—a sympathy upon the existence of which emphasis has been laid in other pages—that he allowed himself to contemplate a slackening of the Debt reduction. Old age pensions are not the outcome only of Mr. Asquith's wishes ; it cannot be doubted that Campbell-Bannerman, too, longed to see the system made operative. But the circumstances under which, as Chancellor of the Exchequer and then as Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith gave this enormous boon to the working classes entitled him to the major part of the credit and the enduring renown earned by his party for its action. To say either that the Liberals were forced to concede it by their pledges, or that it was an electioneering device to get votes in the Dundee election, is on the face of it a statement which is absurd. The Liberals gave no pledge at the general election to produce any old age pension scheme whatever.¹ As for the allegation that an electioneering device was practised, to disprove this it has only to be pointed out that in the Budget statement of 1907 Mr. Asquith definitely stated that the million and a half which that year he was devoting to Debt reduction was in the year following to form the nucleus of a fund for old age pensions.

¹ "His Majesty's Government came into power and went through the last general election entirely unpledged in regard to this matter." Mr. Asquith's Budget Statement, 1908.



THE OLD COUNCIL CHAMBER
AT THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICIAL RESIDENCE, 10 DOWNING STREET.

CHAPTER XII

PRIME MINISTER

THE health of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman had for some time been unsatisfactory; the work of the session, above all the death of his wife, had loaded him with cares and sorrows, and drawn him quickly nearer to the grave. He made another journey in search of health in the autumn of 1907, and when he got back to England many of his friends were pleased at the change which they noticed in him. But, unhappily, a cold caught while attending the Colston celebration at Bristol brought on the old trouble, and from that day Sir Henry became an invalid. With his usual courage he would not at first hear of surrendering the task of leadership. But as the days went by, and he got no nearer to convalescence, it was slowly borne in upon him that the party, which he had led so well and to so splendid a victory, must now find another chief. He began, therefore, to consider the question of his immediate resignation.

It is a useful comment upon the position which Mr. Asquith's loyalty had earned for him, that when at length the vacancy occurred, there was no question of his right to the succession. It had not always been so. Earlier in the session and before, when there were rumours of Sir Henry's resignation, an attempt was

made to put forward the name of Sir Edward Grey. A well known Unionist and Protectionist journal, celebrated for its industry, pushed forward the unobtrusive figure of the Foreign Secretary, and almost offered to make him leader. But now that the actual resignation had taken place, there was only one name in the public mind. Whatever room there was for speculation was in the department of office redistribution. There was here a legitimate field, and the guessing competitions which two years before had amused the man in the train, were now put before him once more. But while it was suggested that Mr. Asquith would resign the Chancellorship of the Exchequer, it was universally felt that he was the only possible Prime Minister.

His later association with Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman had naturally been of a more intimate character than when they had sat together on the Front Bench in the days of Opposition, and the cordiality of the relation thus formed by office had grown as the months passed. Two men cannot be thrown together, day after day, in moments often full of anxiety, without discovering in one another whatever is best in the character and most attractive in the mind. The tribute which Mr. Asquith paid to Sir Henry, both when he himself accepted the succession, and when later in the spring he had to refer to the old leader's departure not only from office, but from all earthly scenes, wanted nothing of deep feeling or sincerity. His testimony to Sir Henry's value, as a leader and a man, was creditable alike to the old leader and the man who eulogised him, and the break in the voice which once arrested the

utterance of the new Prime Minister, assured the doubter that the tribute paid was not merely a conventional one. Mr. Asquith may be suspected of many things, but his greatest enemy would never suggest that he had anything in him of the actor.

The types respectively represented by Campbell-Bannerman and Mr. Asquith are so different as to make a contrast almost startling. Bannerman was eminently genial, expansive, a little inclined to mild jocularities, forceful in an undisguised way. He had never troubled himself to suspect his natural impulses. He had a remarkable power of tact, of managing the unmanageable. He was not a genius, yet for a certain type of political instinct he was unsurpassed. There can be no question that the last general election was a great personal triumph for himself. But it was not a triumph that belonged only to him. It was founded largely upon Free Trade, and, as he had acknowledged, the man who had done most to defend Free Trade had been Mr. Asquith. The victory was one to share between them. And, one having got his reward, it was the plain duty as well as the desire of the party to give the other his.

Yet while they gave him their allegiance, some Liberals were not quite sure of the new leader. They thought he wanted warmth not only in manner, but in Radical conviction. They were impatient of moderation in counsels. They reviewed his history, and they wondered if the choice was the best.

Mr. Redmond spoke at Dublin almost as soon as the appointment was known, and made it plain that Ireland, at least, did not welcome the change. But moderate

men of all parties, the men in whom repose the balance of opinion, welcomed the new Premier, and congratulated themselves upon the fact that the country was to be in charge of one who could be trusted to control not it only but himself.

Usually when a Prime Minister resigns, his successor kisses hands immediately. In the position which now arose, there had to be delay. Following his habit at this time of the year, the King had gone to the South of France. He was getting benefit from his stay at Biarritz, and was not inclined to come north at once. When the expected summons came to Mr. Asquith therefore, he had to face the necessity of leaving the country over which he was to act as chief minister, and, at a time of crisis, be absent for several days. The King was taken to task by a number of Radical mentors. Some of these criticisms were remarkably free and gave piquancy to the incidents which now crowded upon one another.

On Monday Mr. Asquith moved the adjournment of the House, and on Tuesday morning he left Charing Cross. He was pursued by the eyes of an anxiously observant Press. The weather conditions which ruled his voyage across the Straits, the literature he selected to while away the long journey south, his dress, the changing expressions of his face, the friends met in Paris, all were noted, and the facts offered to an insatiable public whose appetite for such things had long been encouraged. He remained for a short time in the French capital before going on again. On Wednesday afternoon he arrived at Biarritz. In the evening he dined alone. The next morning the inter-

view, in which he was advanced to the highest position in the State, duly took place, and he found himself Prime Minister of England. On Thursday he had two short interviews with the King, and at noon left by the Sud express on his return to London.

The reporters were again active ; they filled his train, they crowded the stations through which he passed, they pursued him during his pause in Paris, they saw him safely off French territory, and welcomed him to English ; and of course they were in great force upon the platform at Charing Cross. Mrs. Asquith went to the station to meet him. He descended, however, from an unexpected quarter of the train, and his wife had to dart up the platform in order to greet the newly arrived Prime Minister. His first action in London was to drive at once to Downing Street, to inquire as to the progress of his old chief. Now that he was Prime Minister, public curiosity was alive to discover what changes he would make. In the meantime there were rumours of hitches. Particularly was there a report of competition for the office which he himself had vacated. The success which Mr. Lloyd George had enjoyed at the Board of Trade made him a popular nomination, but there were Whigs in the Cabinet who had worked in the past side by side with Mr. Asquith, who were now said to be demanding the promotion.

In the course of a few days, however, the new appointments became known. The changes had three features of great interest. The first was the expected promotion of Mr. Lloyd George, the second was the elevation to the Cabinet of Mr. Winston Churchill. The third was the evidence the changes offered of the

trend of mind of the Prime Minister. It became clear that Mr. Asquith was determined, from the moment of taking office, to be the leader, not of a section, but of the whole party, and that he was resolved to ignore every fact in a man's history but the fact of his fitness or unfitness for the particular office, appointment to which was being considered. The Liberal Imperialist, the Liberal Leaguer, now that he was Prime Minister, gave to a Pro-Boer the great office which was acknowledged to carry with it the second place in the Ministry, and continued another Pro-Boer in the highest paid situation in the Cabinet.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the negotiations which had taken place during these February days of 1908 was the fact that not only had the country accepted Mr. Asquith without question, but it had discovered in him considerable human interest. The nation has always suffered dictation of the view it must hold of any particular personality among its men of State. So long has it suffered thus, and so uniform in character are the succeeding lessons in the various courses of instruction, that people find it difficult to break away from what, after all, becomes in time merely a conventionalised opinion. His Majesty's tact, Lord Rosebery's perfectability in phrase-making, Mr. Balfour's charm, are taken on trust. So, too, is a certain quality understood to exist in Mr. Asquith—a quality which is supposed to repel the human instinct of the common intelligence when it seeks to relate itself to the mind of the Liberal leader. A very able man, a most discreet man, and a determined man—but a man who repels the enthusiast and who surveys the

race from the lofty altitudes of Balliol scholarship—that was how the common man had been taught to esteem Mr. Asquith. Even with qualifications, it can hardly be pronounced a correct portrait, and that this was so, the public was beginning to discover. For at this time, it is worthy of note, Mr. Asquith began to attract not merely interest but enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm, it is true, is largely the result of the interest which is stimulated in a man when he has suddenly attained the highest rank. But the whole explanation of the phenomena now seen is not to be found in mere interest in a public character. What the incidents of his elevation did for him was not merely to set in relief the qualities that were acknowledged in his reputation, but to suggest the existence of new ones which could bring him nearer to the world of men who had been told he was not one of themselves.

As was expected, the office which Mr. Asquith took himself was that of First Lord of the Treasury. But while he handed over the Exchequer to Mr. Lloyd George, in view of the fact that he had prepared it he still determined to present the Budget statement. Mr. Lloyd George could have got no honour by presenting it. It was not his Budget, and his successes have all been individual ones. It was arranged therefore that the Prime Minister should introduce the Budget and then hand over its defence and further explanation to his successor.

The new Premier was happy in the circumstance that he was able to mark with this Budget the inauguration of his term of office. For it was to be an historic statement—it was to provide a reform demanded by the

country for many years, and promised by Liberals and Conservatives alike for almost as long a time. It was to institute State-paid old age pensions.

It will be for posterity to decide the respective greatest achievements of the country's various ministers. Its voice, and not ours, must decide whether his disestablishment of the Irish Church is Mr. Gladstone's best title to renown, his Berlin treaty Disraeli's, his death duties Budget Sir William Harcourt's. To place Mr. Asquith's various legislative efforts in their true relation is still a futile task. He may do much more. But nothing that he has put upon the statute book is as considerable in its effects as his Finance Act of 1908. Yet never was a measure of its importance signalised by less political feeling. Perhaps only the Reform Bill could compare with it in importance. Yet, apart from the incident of the faint-hearted opposition of the House of Lords, the Bill went through without a dissentient voice. Mr. Asquith, as the first minister to embody in legislation an acknowledgment of the right of every man and woman in this country to live in comfort when too infirm to earn a living, will appear a larger figure when it is possible to survey him over a wider perspective. The circumstances of the passing of the measure were too little controversial to make the chief instrument in its founding immediately significant to the ordinary mind.

The second great legislative effort of his first year of Premiership, however, wanted nothing of public attention. The Licensing Bill was one to the drafting of which he had devoted much of his time during the months before Sir Henry's resignation. When the old leader lay in

his bed, broken physically but still strong in spirit, he sent for Mr. Asquith and spoke to him of the Bill. He had just before, Mr. T. P. O'Connor tells us, received in interview the Archbishop of Canterbury, "who had observed that it must be a great pleasure to Sir Henry to think that his name was linked to such a measure of social hope and reform as the Licensing Bill. 'But,' said 'C.-B.,' 'Asquith, it is your Bill, not mine,' a saying of characteristic modesty and generosity."¹

That Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman helped to draft the Bill, and that when it was presented it was partly his, is doubtless true; but with his withdrawal it became wholly Mr. Asquith's measure. As the weeks went by, however, public interest in his old age pensions scheme was suspended, and attention concentrated upon his attempt at licensing reform. It is safe to say that no more appalling bitterness was ever excited in political controversy than was aroused during the passing through the House of Commons of this Bill. No argument was too illogical to urge against it. It was to rob the brewer and at the same time was not going to stop drinking. It was "cruel," and—blessed word in time of need—"confiscatory." The malignant power of the "Trade" had not been long in showing itself. The election at Peckham made the name of that suburb a byword in political history. A fourteen years time limit was the sheerest robbery, though a few years before, the leader of the party of reaction, the late Lord Salisbury, had said that a limit of five years would be a most generous allowance.

As was to be expected, the most lavish share of the

¹ "Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman," by T. P. O'Connor, M.P.

abuse excited by the Bill was reserved for Mr. Asquith. Nothing could have been better for him. From the moment he introduced the Bill he went on strengthening his hold upon the party. His conduct, in face of the manifest unpopularity of the Bill with the easily swayed masses of the country, was what those who knew him best expected of him.

But he was still not widely understood. The savage attack now made upon him, however, gave him just the opportunity he needed for convincing the party of his qualities as a man and as a leader. Throughout the long and weary sittings of the House of Commons the Prime Minister held his ground, listened with indomitable patience to the shrieking protests of the "Trade," and in a speech of great force during the recess announced his absolute determination to carry the Bill through every one of its stages in the House of Commons. When the debates were resumed in the House he went on slowly forcing the measure through. But in his methods some of his most marked characteristics appeared. He was cold and firm and logical. He was conciliatory when a point arose which did not involve a principle, but immovable when a principle was in danger. His discretion and tenacity joined to impress all his movements. But another attribute was seen in his determination to make clear what would, so far as he could control them, be the future course of events. It is the amiable pretence of some politicians to believe that until the country and Parliament has carefully discussed a proposed measure of reform, all judgment is suspended. Mr. Asquith ignored that tradition. He knew—he could not be ignorant—that

the Bill was threatened. By whom it was threatened he also knew. And so, when he wound up the debate on the second reading, he allowed to creep into his speech a passage the meaning of which was lost upon no one.

"The Bill gives a fourteen years' notice, and it is denounced as an act of injustice. I will suggest another way in which the matter can be dealt with. It is going to be my duty for the last time to introduce a Budget. Suppose I come down to the House and say it is about time we revised our scale of licence duties. If I were to suggest, instead of the present trumpery and illusory scale, a real and adequate and swingeing duty, would that be confiscation? I will let the House so far into my secrets as to say I am not going to propose it; but suppose the present Chancellor proposed it this year or next? Suppose the Bill does not pass into law? Suppose—being a more moderate man than I—the right honourable gentleman were to say that they would do this, step by step, and that for the next ten years there shall be an ascending scale of licence duties for these public-houses—will that be confiscation?"

The passage is worth quoting as an illustration of the Prime Minister's independence of an ancient pretence. It has other features slightly unexpected. It has a quality of dry humour both in its reference to the Radical colleague and successor at the Exchequer as "a more moderate man than I," and in its gentle note of inquiry for new meanings for the term confiscation.

The history of the Parliamentary session of 1908 must have reminded Mr. Asquith of another notable

autumn session in the work of which he took an important part. Between 1908 and 1893 there are many parallels. Then, as now, members were called upon to forsake their spas and yachts to put through the House two highly contentious measures of reform and the two sessions had each the distinction of witnessing the passage through the Commons of one of the two best-abused pieces of legislation during the past fifty years—the Home Rule Bill and the Licensing Bill.

The parallel in regard to these two measures extends, however, beyond the House of Commons. In 1893 the House of Lords destroyed the work of the session by throwing out Home Rule and by making impossible the passage of the Employers' Liability Bill. In 1908 it rejected the Licensing Bill and left no doubt in the mind of Liberals of the treatment it would give the Education Bill if that measure were ever to have the questionable felicity of coming before it.

But though the greatest part of the work of a strenuous session was destroyed, and though the Prime Minister might well feel also, as he reviewed the fifteen years, that the march of Liberalism had been, not onwards, but in a circle, there can be no question that in the autumn session of 1908 he immeasurably increased his personal prestige in the party.

Some of his supporters had been inclined to accept the popular view of his qualities, to think him supremely able but lacking in fire and enthusiasm. But during a very trying period—trying to the party's courage, to its patience, to its hope—he led, not merely bravely and strongly, but with a certain personal touch which did

not fail to awaken response in those who sat behind him. He showed himself, not merely a tactician, but a man genuinely anxious for the triumph of militant Liberalism. Informed by such a spirit, his practical mind was certain to carry him into actions of which the less moderate would not approve. Had he been less wishful for some measure of reform, it would have been simpler to have uttered vague hopes for the passage of unparalleled national improvements while refusing to acknowledge the possibility of a bridge of conciliation over which lesser reforms might pass. When his type of mind is remembered, it is the highest tribute to his earnestness to say that he was ready to yield whenever yielding did not involve a principle.

But with one section his methods were not popular. The extreme left wing of the Radical party has no sympathy with the statesman who is governed by discretion. When he talked of compromise it scorned the very word. In the disagreements, such as they were, between the leader and some of his supporters, may be seen merely a conflict of two psychological types. On the one hand is the man who flings himself upon the high rock, finding or losing foothold as he may, set only on immediately getting to the top. On the other hand is the man who remembers that some miles away is a simpler ascent by path, and that, at a particular point, this path joins another leading to the summit before his eyes; and who sets out to seek that path. Mr. Asquith will never uselessly hurt the party cause upon the rock. He will plod on until he reaches the path.

He was ready to grant an extension of time limit

beyond the fourteen years. Reluctantly the Temperance party consented. But had the House of Lords allowed the measure a hearing, and had they stood out for a twenty-eight years' limit, promising then to pass the Act, it might still have been Mr. Asquith's inclination to accept the offer. For by so doing he would have been able to recover for the nation the principle that it, and not the "Trade," should control the monopoly. By so yielding he would have got something done.

But the Education Bill negotiations provide the best illustration of Mr. Asquith's quality. No man ever gave himself more earnestly to an attempt to solve a problem than did he when he took up the unhappy question of the schools. Day after day he and Mr. Runciman consulted with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the leaders of Nonconformity, in an effort to end the controversy once and for all. But at last there came a demand for an increased grant for the Church schools proposed to be contracted out—a demand which the Prime Minister felt he could not accept. On December 7th, therefore, he announced the withdrawal of the Bill. But it was a great disappointment to him. And it was not merely that he was disappointed of the prestige for the Government which the ending of a long and bitter controversy would have earned. His intensely practical mind wanted a settlement in order that he might get on to the next task before him. His leadership has shown itself nothing if not practical.

With the possibilities of the future, and its influence upon his mind and methods, an attempt has been made to deal elsewhere. But some forecast may be made

here of the work he may be expected to do as a legislator. Chief among the tasks of the future which must devolve upon him must be the subjugation of the power of the House of Lords. No one has seen better than he himself of what that irresponsible chamber is capable. It has destroyed, and it will destroy again. No man living has suffered through its actions more, either as a legislator or as a member of a Cabinet and a party, than he.

He was a single-chamber man when Mr. Gladstone was not, and when he was advanced to office and saw his Employers' Liability Bill thrown out, he got his lesson in the methods of the Upper House. "Are we going to accept its dictation?" he asked when the Lords inserted in his Bill its mutilating contracting-out claim. "We are not."

He put the question in a foremost place in his speeches during the General Election of 1895, and he has shown an unwavering opposition to the continuance of the Lords' veto ever since. He must, however, take his share of the blame which belongs to the party as a whole for not foreseeing what would happen. It is an obvious commonplace of politics that the balance of power passes from one side to the other as general election succeeds general election. The mistake the Liberal party has always made in its policy towards the House of Lords has been to make the question of abolition of the veto the issue, not for the election it is its turn to win, but the election in which it is its turn to lose. It made this mistake in 1895 and in 1906.

Henceforth, however, the House of Lords question must be the supreme one. It cannot be said that Mr.

Asquith has failed to recognise this: "It is," he said lately, "the dominating issue." For every reason he can be trusted to make it so. His own work as a legislator has suffered as much as that of any politician by the action of the Peers. His practical mind sees that, wish as he may to get on, he cannot do so until the barrier is removed. The force of the Liberal party will be spent, not only for a few years, but for ever, unless this question is settled.

But in addition to these negative reasons for his concentrating upon the question, there is the attraction of the opportunity—which would be presented by his doing so—to get for himself a permanent place among the statesmen of the century. He it was who gave old age pensions. It may very well be his lot to free the democratic institutions of the country from the last strain of feudalism.

CHAPTER XIII

CHARACTERISTICS

As has been suggested throughout the preceding pages, the two qualities which stand out most strongly in the Asquith character are discretion and tenacity. Contrasted with those of his two most distinguished political contemporaries, his personality emerges as one less complex than Mr. Balfour's, more difficult of immediate comprehension than Mr. Chamberlain's. Mr. Balfour's character must remain as long as he lives an insoluble mystery. Every year it grows more difficult of pursuit, and those who have been resolved to follow, in the hope of solving the riddle, have found themselves in a shadowland, where all is vague, and where the only sound that comes to them is one of mocking laughter. Mr. Chamberlain, on the other hand, has always been admirably direct. He has exchanged thrusts for diplomacy, he has never picked his words when he has had anything to say. He has shown himself virile, determined, devoted. But he has made big blunders. He may almost be said to have blurted out his mind. Mr. Asquith's character is less psychologically cosmopolitan than Mr. Balfour's. In him are not to be found the same number of qualities, each foreign to the others, and each asserting itself in turn. But while he has Mr. Chamberlain's

tenacity, he has the additional quality of discretion. This practical wisdom, this feeling for consequences, has prevented him from making some of the bold bids for popular applause which distinguished the platform performances of the Birmingham statesman, and incidentally from perpetrating those occasional wild plunges into the air of Imperialism which sometimes ended in the abrupt descent to earth of the soarer.

The consequences of practising such wisdom are not, however, always to be welcomed by the politician; for if he leaves nothing behind which may be recalled against him, he may also find some day that he has left little more which can be remembered to his credit. Unwise and vehement talk will obtain a vogue for which silent wisdom cannot hope.

"The multitude," says Mr. Wilfrid Ward in his recently published study of Mr. Balfour, "loves to be addressed in tones loud and positive. Well-balanced thought even seems to it a shadow. Strong statements mean strength, guarded statements weakness."

It may be that Mr. Asquith desires a wide reputation less than some of his contemporaries. But while there are men with so single an eye as to desire to remain in the country's service merely because nobody else can be found to do the work, the motive of most politicians, even of the higher type, is a mixture of patriotism and personal ambition. Not every one is capable of the belief that he, and he alone, can save his country; and most serious politicians—that is, the men who are not content that their votes and views should be the mere coinage of the division lobby—desire, and live in the hope of creating, a popular reputation. If the time

comes when they are indifferent to one they will usually be found retiring from politics altogether and saying with the present Duke of Norfolk, "Why should I be in the Cabinet when I do not want to be there, and there are many who do?"

Mr. Asquith's motive is not so perfectly obvious as that of some of the able men who surround or who oppose him. Like many of these, he is ambitious, he is patriotic. The difference between himself and the others will probably be found in the character of his ambition. Before associating his name with ambition it is necessary to endow the idea of ambition with a quality other than the common one of a desire to stand and hold men's admiration. Mr. Asquith's ambition is for something else than that, and if he desires popularity, if he wants to be known among the people, it is because he knows that it is only from the people that power comes.

If asked whether he would prefer to be popular as Mr. Lloyd George is, to be feared as Mr. Chamberlain was, or to have the power of fascination as Mr. Balfour has it, Mr. Asquith would probably reply by asking for none of these things. He would ask to be efficient. Efficiency is what he requires in his ministers and what, with even greater insistence, he asks for in himself. He wants to be effective. But in spite of the suggestion of an earlier time that he desired to appear a strong man, it may be claimed that he wants to be effective rather than to be considered so.

A moment's thought will probably lead the casual observer of politics to the truth that to one of the two classes—the men who want to be useful and the men

who want to be esteemed useful—belong all politicians and even all statesmen. A man of the first type is ready to forego appreciation if, by so doing, his work may be of greater value. A politician of the second class, on the other hand, while he is quite ready to be useful, is not inclined to suppress himself to increase the success of his labour. But while it would be invidious to attempt to associate with the latter class the name of any living personage, it can be acknowledged that Mr. Asquith—and for that matter Sir Edward Grey—belong to the former. He is a little impatient of shop windows; so long as the stock is all right he will not mind greatly whether the latest illuminant is employed to light the show-case. It is not that he hates light and public approval. He is no recluse living away from the haunts of men and asking only to be undisturbed. It is merely that he ignores popular applause as being one of the less important facts in political life. But any satisfaction that comes of being the victor springs from the fact of his own knowledge that he triumphs rather than from the fact of other people's recognition.

This brings us to the point that a salient characteristic of Mr. Asquith is his intense political self-respect. To respect oneself is not to regard oneself with approval; it implies merely a refusal to take advantage of the permission eternally offered to human nature by an average standard of conduct. But personal self-respect does not necessarily imply political. A man who practises it in private life will often be found upon the platform declaiming the vulgarest of truisms, the easiest of incitements to win

unthinking approval. With difficulty he suppresses a sardonic smile at the screaming crowd, and enjoys its dull applause because he finds folly, as something in human nature, mildly amusing. But he enjoys it also because he wants popularity, and is ready to accept it at any cost.

Mr. Asquith has done several things of which many of his countrymen have been unable to approve. He has taken the wrong side, as some conceive it, in more than one controversy. But whatever may be urged against him, no one is able to accuse him of losing hold upon himself, or forgetting his dignity, of truckling, whether on the platform or in the House of Commons, to that section of the people who keep the treasury of unrestrained and unreasoning applause. From such he asks no payment.

There is a type of mind which finds a pleasure in the thought that the actions it dictates are more likely to be disliked by the vulgar than applauded. But though Mr. Asquith is free from such eccentricity, he is one who would examine very closely any inclination in himself, if such should arise, towards too facile agreement with the popular wishes of the moment. He has really a very honest desire that his action shall be an answer to the voice of truth, and he is neither eccentric in his distrust of the people, nor easily swayed by the threats of the mass meeting. He is no lover of the *via media* when that way is chosen because it is a pleasant escape from harder paths. But inasmuch as it is often the shortest road to reform, he, as a practical statesman, will as often be found upon it.

There are two kinds of moderation. The first is that

of the man who will not hurry lest he and those who follow should lose their way. The second belongs to the man who will not hurry because the weather is hot or the road dusty. Mr. Asquith's moderation is of the first kind.

If Mr. Asquith declines to be hurried by urgent voices, he also declines sometimes to move at all. He is never to be driven from his position by clamour. In his attitude towards the dynamiters, and still more in his utterances upon the subject of Featherstone, he simply ignored the vituperation of which he was the object, and held his ground. But for an example of his quality of firmness we do not need to go further back in political history than the period of the recent Licensing Bill. He went forward with the measure with inflexible determination, indifferent to, rather than angered by, opposition; listening neither to the hoarse threats of the "Trade," nor the shriller shrieks of the brewer's supporters in the Press. It is when attacked in this way that Mr. Asquith's character appears at its best. Upon a platform he may show to less advantage than some of his colleagues. But when his back is against the wall he at once shows his quality. He is a break-water against the seas of abuse. And he can survive a yet better test of strength: he can remain unmoved by the ocean of misrepresentation. He is sometimes ready to meet a challenge by reassertion of an opinion, although he does not repeat in order that, mingled with the repetition, an apology shall appear. But he often prefers merely to point to a past statement. When he declined the amnesty to the dynamiters, he not only did so in unmistakable terms, but made it none the

less clear that he would never allow himself to say a word upon the matter again. This cultivation in his public manner of a note of finality may have led him sometimes into difficulties. For new facts transpire and new views suggest themselves. But, like an opponent from whom in his failure to cultivate the public he completely differs, he is fond of the uncompromising negative. When Mr. Chamberlain was at the Colonial Office and was interrogated in the House of Commons, he would sometimes rise quickly, and observe, "I answered the question yesterday"; then with a peculiar snap of the jaws, "I have nothing to add!" Mr. Asquith has nothing to add. He does not resent, but he is able to ignore, questions when he does not feel called upon to answer.

In his conduct of public affairs, Mr. Asquith impresses the beholder chiefly by his grasp of facts. If he is unable to cast the glamour of political genius over the work he touches, he exhibits an understanding of it which is remarkable. The success of this comprehension, even when it opposes itself to the most intricate of details, is never in doubt. And he has moreover the singular happiness of being able to communicate information to others in the condition of clarity in which, in his own mind, he has been able to render it.

This wide comprehension is characteristic, and is not to be ascribed to the habit of mind which practice of the law has fostered. A lawyer may be very quick and ready in picking up the threads of a case, but his knowledge of it must often be superficial. It is true that a gift of rapid assimilation of facts is often accompanied by

a wide and deep knowledge of them. But it does not imply such an accompaniment.

Some men will acquire ideas when it is possible to do so quickly, but they have not the patience necessary to get understanding of such things as may only be truly comprehended after elaborate thinking. To his other qualities, however, Mr. Asquith adds that of industry. He is ready to study and to toil if by so doing he may widen his comprehension of the matter before him. If genius really consists in an infinite capacity for taking pains, and if that definition permits of no qualification, then it is certain that only men of genius can ever succeed in the House of Commons. For though a man may charm by a few speeches full of epigrams and wit, if he will not take infinite pains, if he will not set himself seriously day after day to know the subject of which he would speak, if he comes into form with the lesson of the day unlearned, he will certainly be found out, and as certainly punished. The House will not long tolerate a man who is not painstaking. A member who reads, who gets up his subject, who prepares his speeches—in a word, who respects the House, will find the House respecting him. A man, on the other hand, who offers merely a pyrotechnic display, can look only for a brief period of general interest. Even children tire of fireworks after a little while. Reasoning men weary the sooner. The men who have won the ear of the House of Commons have been the men who have given their whole minds to the national work. Mr. Asquith needed other qualities than that of industry to become what he is. But had he wanted that, had he not shown the “infinite capacity,” he could

never have conquered the House. He is supreme because he has been a supreme worker. At the Exchequer, in the matter of licensing, in the preparation of Bills at the Home Office, in the complicated details of Disendowment, he has set himself, not merely to learn, but to grasp the meaning of facts. True, he may sometimes remind us that he is a lawyer. But we need not, because of such a reminiscence, draw analogies between him and the K.C. with a swollen practice and a superficial knowledge of half-a-dozen cases proceeding in as many courts of the Division to which this pervasive practitioner is attached. Mr. Asquith's intimate acquaintance with factories and with the conditions obtaining in them did not come to him merely through deputations or sensational articles in the Press. In one case it did not even come to him from the ordinary reports of his representatives outside. He discovered the fact of the high mortality in the Belfast linen factories from his own study of statistics. And, though it may be true that he had to get up the Disestablishment case in some of its details, it can certainly be said that not only did he have a general comprehension of the question and a very lively sense of Welsh grievances, but that he acquired his facts with complete understanding, not only of them as they stood—as a lawyer would do—but of their bearing on all other contingent facts—as could be done only by a statesman.

Mr. Asquith's understanding of circumstances extends to eventualities. It is this which increases his value to the State and perhaps checks his popularity. What a lawyer needs, what a popular platform orator requires,

is an immediate success. What the statesman—and as a statesman what Mr. Asquith—regards, and regards so much as to exclude all thoughts not of it from his mind, is a permanent success. He gauges “the long result of time.” He looks beyond the populace, beyond the jury box, for the applause and verdict of that posterity which reserves its instabilities of opinion for its contemporary problem and views the past with justice and humour.

But indeed even in his understanding of immediate details Mr. Asquith is much less of a lawyer than many non-professional politicians who have held office. Some of these have had to depend for their case largely upon the staff of the Department, and their attitude in relation to the officials approximates more closely to that of the barrister in his relation to the solicitor than does the actual barrister Mr. Asquith. It is because he has tried to see, not only the immediate, but the contingent facts that Mr. Asquith has sometimes gone slowly. Thus his success, though less of a popular one, is perfectly stable. And it is a curious comment upon the public mind that men trust him most because he distrusts most their rash enthusiasms. He has a great reputation. But it is not a reputation for any of the more decorative qualities of the statesman, such as imagination or a feeling for crowds. Mr. Asquith's success with common men rather rests upon the latter's feeling that he looks at a question as they would themselves look at it if it was their private business and not merely one of their abstract interests; if it had to be attended to, not in a screaming political meeting, but in their office or shop. Before the facts of Mr.

Asquith's politics can be supposed to get applause, there must be time for the contingent facts to come into prominence.

Of his reputation Mr. Asquith has always been very careful. But this remark is liable to be misunderstood unless it is added that he is careful of his reputation simply for the reason that he is careful of the work he does. In other words, his care of his work is not the result of the care of his reputation, but the cause. When a man merely sets out to acquire notoriety and then looks round to find some foundation on which the notoriety may be built, his building will be a vanity. Instructed simply by his desire for public approval, he will choose the first and easiest foundation which offers. He may never be enough of a hypocrite to be indifferent to the quality of his actions so long as the public refrains from examining them, but he will always be in danger of discovering suddenly that he would prefer a reputation for something else than for the particular quality on which his own reputation rests. He may tire of being thought thorough when he sees his rival praised for his careless brilliance. He may weary of being called splendid when he beholds his colleague applauded for his self-effacement. He may delight no more in being styled the "People's Tribune" when he finds his fellow-minister described as "a more serious statesman" than himself.

The good workman, however,—and Mr. Asquith is a good workman, though he works for good wages, and expects them, and remembers his reputation—would still, if on a desert island, do his work as well as he could. A man may have no objection to applause, and yet

possess such qualities as would make him, even if no applause could reach him, live up to the highest limit of his capacity. Mr. Asquith is very ambitious. But he is ambitious for his work rather than for himself.

Just as he is very careful, so is he reliable. He keeps his pledges. And he keeps them for the reason that he will not make them until he sees that to keep them will be more than a mere possibility. Deputations have left him sometimes with little enough enthusiasm. They have found him cold, and believed him apathetic. They had hoped for a promise, and they got only vague generalities, or a flat refusal. But their disappointment was often due to nothing else than the honesty of the minister. More enthusiastic politicians, who turn their faces towards the future with short-sighted eyes, could express glibly enough intentions they might hope to accomplish, only in some period far beyond their immediate perspective. He will make no promises unless he can keep them, and keep them soon. To expect him to be otherwise is to expect him untrue to his ordinary instinct. He gave old age pensions though he did not promise them. He reduced taxes in his first Budget, though before the election, when a promise of reduction would have been highly popular, he said he could see no prospect of being able to remove the unpopular imposts.

His methods of attaining his ends are curiously consistent with the qualities which, from an early age, have most strongly marked his character. He wants his own way. But discretion teaches him that he

cannot always have it immediately, and his tenacity keeps him working until he wins. Discretion tells him that the long road round the mountain is safer for his purpose than the abrupt track over, and his tenacity makes it impossible for him to abandon the road through weariness. He is less bold than determined. He advances slowly ; his legislative reforms have always been on the side of moderation. But he never goes back. There are those behind him who would hasten his footsteps. But just as he will not be compelled to yield a yard he has covered, so will he not be pushed forward.

He has a perfect mastery of the political game. He knows every method which is at his disposal for attaining his ends, and he goes through them one by one, slowly and steadily, but always with his eye upon the object he wishes to accomplish. He feels it to be useless to hope to reach the land of temperance reform merely by surmounting the barrier quickly raised by the willing hands of the brewers. He knows that beyond that barrier is the impassable wall called the House of Lords. In his march to educational peace he will not waste his strength upon the hill of misunderstanding, because he knows that beyond it there is the mountain of clerical bias. Impulsive methods are not for him. He seeks a way round. He believes that beside the mountain winds a road of compromise, and he is quite ready to tread it. For what he wants is to get beyond the mountain. Whether he goes over or round does not so much matter.

His willingness to go round is not the willingness of

the weak. He goes round the mountain not because he fears to climb, but because he would rather be practical than heroic. He wants to get past and on. He may take his own time to do what he intends. But he will certainly do it. His whole political life has proved him to be a statesman by results.

It has been said that Mr. Asquith enjoys in a remarkable degree the trust of his fellow-men. If he has not always and immediately excited their enthusiasm it is because they do not fully comprehend him. Greatly gifted though he is as a speaker, he is essentially a man not of words but deeds. For it is only those who know nothing of him who question the intensity of his spirit. Beneath the seemingly cold exterior is a burning passion for reform—an intense humanity. But the man has so mastered the art of reserve that he will not show himself. If only his critics could be endowed for a moment with some strong intuition we should hear less of his coldness. In all the true relationships of life he is warm and natural. He is a perfect friend; he is devoted to his children. But to a man of his training any public exhibition of feeling is abhorrent, and rather than compromise this rule of his life he will be content to be called a hard and cold man. He will do many things, he will spend himself for the cause he loves, for his friends; he will brave every kind of opposition. But he would rather go back to the private benches than keep the party allegiance by exhibitions of feeling. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Mr. Asquith is but a comparative success upon the platform. He is not, however, a platform failure. His gifts are

too wide for him not to attract men by the sheer fact of his intellect, for him to fail to please them merely as they are pleased at a spectacle, by the quickness of his mind.

Fourteen years ago a critic in *The Saturday Review* pointed out that it was this very quality of intellect by which he tried, and tried in vain, to reach the populace, that he tried with success to reach the House of Commons. If this was true then, it is even more true to-day. Of Mr. Asquith's supreme success as a House of Commons man there can be no question. It has its favourites, and he is one. His qualities are exactly those which go to the making of Parliamentary success. To his industry allusion has already been made. But he succeeds there for other reasons. He has great natural gifts of intellect. He has a splendid reasoning faculty; and just as a man at a political meeting likes to have his emotional appetite fed, so the member of the House of Commons likes to have his intellectual appetite waited upon by the orators of the Front Bench. His style, too, is full of strong cold colour. His oratory moves on like a splendid glassy river. It is distinguished, it is rounded, it is never at fault. In outlook, Mr. Asquith is still something of the Yorkshire Nonconformist. In style he is of Oxford. He never falls into those unhappy lapses upon which the less wary politician in the vague enthusiasm of the moment sometimes ungracefully descends. He is never seen floundering in and out of "blazing indiscretions." It will be found that when some unhappy phrase has dropped inadvertently from the lips of a minister who, for the moment, is happily unconscious of what future opportunities

he is offering open-handed to his opponents, the minister is not Mr. Asquith. One reason for this is that he is too careful. Another is that whatever may have been said about his years at Oxford, he does not try to be clever. He is a phrase-maker, but he does not make phrases that can be quite admirably adapted in skilful hands to himself and to his policy. We do not hear from him of "terminological inexactitudes" or of "hen-roosts."

But while his wisdom is wholly admirable, it is permissible, both for his own sake and for the party's, to wish that it did not act so tightly upon his political enthusiasm. That he is completely Liberal in his sympathies, no careful student of his speeches can doubt. The war may seem to some to have obscured, temporarily, the fire of his Liberalism ; but the history of his career, viewed as a whole, can leave no doubt that, whether in office or Opposition, in the light of the platform or the obscurity of the Department, he is a man of quiet but intense Liberal conviction. But it is one of the fundamentals of Liberalism that there shall sometimes be a great throwing to the winds of discretion, of wisdom, of the whole world. For such mad heroics, some enquire, is Mr. Asquith fitted? It is significant that those who know him best are most ready with an affirmative.

And the impatient Radical who questions his leader because he will not spend all upon a single cause, because he clings to the counsels of moderation, may very well set a guard upon his tongue. It is possible, it almost begins to be probable, that before long he will have to take a new view of his chief, and will

have to rebuke himself for the dulness of his intuitions. For latterly Mr. Asquith has been showing depths in his character hitherto unsuspected. There has been heard in his voice a passion that belongs more commonly to the Radical. The suspicion hitherto held only by those who know him, that he is suppressing his enthusiasm for popular issues rather than trying to beat it up—that suspicion, so long a private one, is becoming more general. Every man has something in him of the unknowable. It is this quiet hidden passion which has formed the unknowable in Mr. Asquith. Echoes of it were heard in some of his earlier speeches, particularly in his Leeds speech, and in some of the other addresses of the autumn campaign of 1893. Will he ever break free from the restraint he puts upon himself? There are already signs that he is doing so. That he will ever completely emancipate himself is doubtful. Restraint with him is not a conscious act; it is a habit. And at fifty-six a man does not easily shed the manners and methods of a lifetime.

But as the years pass he will certainly enjoy the increased trust of Liberals with enough insight to realise the character of his self-suppression. To the unthinking, who can only understand a direct appeal to the more elementary instincts of laughter and tears, he may still appear a little cold. But it will not be long before thoughtful Liberals begin to realize, what those who know him best realize now, that he is a man of warm heart and of immovable Liberal convictions.

The character here outlined will make easier of

understanding a good deal that at first appears difficult of comprehension in his policy. If, at the beginning of a study of his political history, he were called an opportunist, we should want to know what was meant by the term. If what was implied was the type of politician who takes up a question when it is likely to be popular and drops it as soon as the smile of the crowd dies out, then Mr. Asquith is not an opportunist. In the first place, he does not very much mind whether the crowd smiles or frowns. But apart from this his life disproves the charge as soon as it is brought against him. It is not necessary to go further back in the record of his career than the year just closed. The story of the Licensing Bill is a very obvious illustration of his indifference to the cheaper kinds of popularity. It is true that, with a charming want of logic, his opponents, at the same time that they assured him of the unpopularity of his Bill, told him that he had introduced it to catch votes. But that he lost popularity in the country to carry out an old intention is undoubted. This delineation of his character has been very unsuccessful if it has not made clear his complete indifference to popular clamour.

He is much too independent to modify his opinions at the bidding of another. True, he stood with Lord Rosebery when the latter held back from the Liberal march. But if at this time of crisis he was not bold, he was at least consistent.

Minds were confused. There was a good deal of bitterness. Several different pairs of lips uttered as many different words of counsel. Discretion commanded

a halt. It was to the impersonal force of discretion rather than to the personal force of Lord Rosebery that Mr. Asquith yielded. Let it be remembered that neither he nor Lord Rosebery at this time abandoned, as some have supposed, their ancient belief. The latter afterwards found himself, it is true, unable to accommodate himself to, or to follow the banner of, the new and vital Liberalism of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. But at this time he was what he had always been—a Home Ruler, a Disestablisher, a Newcastle programme man. For Home Rule he had no great enthusiasm. But he did not abandon it. Mr. Asquith's position was different. He followed Lord Rosebery, but, unlike the latter, he did not later find himself out of touch with the party but nearer to it.

What he did at this time was to wait patiently for the clouds to blow over. He kept out of the way, and went on with the work of advocacy in the courts.

His position was one of great delicacy. Personally attached to the leader of what was only one section of the party, he was yet completely devoted to the party as a whole. He was determined neither to be untrue to what he conceived to be the claims of friendship on the one hand, nor to those of Liberalism on the other. He, therefore, as the best solution of his difficulty, effaced himself. He believed the party was out of hand, that it would do rash things, that it was dangerous to itself and to the country. The only course open to him, he felt, was to let it exhaust its mad and contradictory

spirits. For the rest he was content to remain in the shadow of the leader who was no longer a leader, in the meantime proceeding quietly with his work at the Bar.

Those who had begun to doubt him, however, did so unjustly. When the opportunity came to him to help in the reconstruction of the party, he showed himself quite unselfish and straightforward. Sir William Harcourt resigned, and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman took his place. In some quarters it was felt that Mr. Asquith had a better claim. He effaced himself, however, as he had done before, and loyally supported the new leader. In a few months a strain was put upon this loyalty by the Boer war, and by the differences which, through the war, undoubtedly arose in the relations of Liberal politicians. The strain was a very severe one. But the loyalty of Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Asquith, and their friends survived. Sir Henry may not have represented their view. Indeed, he did not. But he was the leader of the party. To say that they repudiated him was a statement characterised by one of them at most times undemonstrative in his platform utterances in a way that left no doubt of the intensity of his feelings towards the calumny. "It is," said Sir Edward Grey, "a foul and filthy lie."

To the leader whose views he could not endorse Mr. Asquith remained perfectly true. And perfectly true he has remained ever since. This loyalty to Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, strained though it often was, never broke down. And the fact that it never did revealed to some another unexpected trait in Mr.

Asquith's character. If any doubted his devotion, they must have wondered that never once was he betrayed into revolt. It is true that a revolt would not have succeeded. For no statesman excited greater sympathy and affection than did Sir Henry in the later years of his life. But Mr. Asquith's character was one not easily moulded. It could never readily have poured itself into some crucible of policy fashioned by Sir Henry. A less calculating man, a critic may suggest, might have revolted. It would be truer to say a less loyal man. Mr. Asquith could have accepted office and then have asserted himself slowly. The calculating man would certainly have waited until he had obtained elevation to office. But it is not so certain that the calculating man, having obtained his desire, would have remained loyal. It would have been so easy for him to have played the part of the splendidly independent statesman, the man of individuality. He might not, indeed, have been Prime Minister, but he might have piqued public interest until he became in fact, if not in name, the leader of the party. He suppressed himself, however, completely, and was as little assertive of his independence as one of the junior members of the Cabinet. Indeed, it is a question whether he stood out from the others as did one or two of the Radical ministers who now held office for the first time. It must be remembered that when Sir Henry became Premier there seemed no prospect of his requiring a successor during the existing Parliament at least. As the ages of Prime Ministers go, Sir Henry might very well have lived not merely to see the present Administration go out of office, but to form another.

His mind was splendidly fresh and vigorous; he was strong with the strength that comes to a politician when he knows a great party is behind him; he was ready for years of strenuous party effort. Had the party been permitted to possess his services until again in Opposition many things might have happened. Two colleagues of Mr. Asquith had in a few short years seen swept from them what once seemed an assured supremacy. It was possible that when next the party was in power a younger man would step into the succession. Mr. Asquith, however, ignored all such possibilities. Whatever he may have felt, he remained faithful. His reward came sooner than he expected in the unanimous feeling of the party, when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman died, that there was only one possible successor.

As a Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith has been very much what might have been expected of him. He has shown himself alert in leadership, quietly courageous, very efficient. Upon becoming head of the party, he corrected what he believed were the weak spots in the ministry by changes of various kinds. But the most important change made was in Cabinet procedure. Under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Cabinet had resolved itself into a number of independent public committees. Mr. Asquith was dissatisfied with the system. It did not make for co-ordination of public interests; it did not encourage unity in policy. It had at first been possible under Sir Henry, because Sir Henry had come into power with so extraordinary a public confidence, and had for that reason exercised so dominating an influence, that these various committees could be per-

suaded to work in some kind of unison. But as the party settled down, as the first exhilaration of success subsided and the work began to lose the glamour which had been seen upon it by longing eyes of men in Opposition, the system became a difficult one to work smoothly. While it continued in force it was not easy for a Prime Minister to be much more than a unit of the Cabinet or of a committee. For him to assert his will over all was not possible.

The system was unsatisfactory, and when Mr. Asquith became Premier, he ended it. He set himself to make the Cabinet a unity, and an instrument of his will. He has not always succeeded without a good deal of trouble; one of his ministers, indeed, on one occasion, outlined a policy which he intended should be pursued by his party, a policy which was the direct opposite of that put forward a day or two before by the Prime Minister. Mr. Asquith is always loyal to his colleagues. But on this occasion he showed himself indifferent to anything which might later be said about Cabinet disagreements, and at once rose and reiterated his original policy. The subordinate had now to give way or resign. He gave way.

Mr. Asquith rules his Cabinet. He believes that to be Prime Minister means to be controlling minister, and he rules as no Prime Minister has done since Mr. Gladstone. For though Mr. Balfour is to-day the complete master of his forces, he was not so while in office. Mr. Chamberlain, too, is generally supposed to have asserted his claim in the Cabinet of Lord Salisbury. But if it is necessary to go to Mr. Gladstone for a parallel for Mr. Asquith's control of his

Cabinet, care must be exercised in the employment of the parallel. Mr. Asquith's method is not Mr. Gladstone's. He does not dominate the Cabinet and abolish opposition by the flash of a terrible eye. His old qualities, which have carried him so far, carry him still. He accomplishes his end by discretion. He goes round the mountain without wasting time by frowning upon it, and he lacks none of his old tenacity.

In his relations with the rank and file Mr. Asquith has generally been happy. Though he does not fascinate as Mr. Gladstone did, though he does not hail them with the cheery laugh and word as did the late Prime Minister, he holds their trust. They believe in him as the average elector believes in him; they believe that he is supremely level-headed, that while he may still "hasten slowly" he will never compromise himself or the party; they regard him as their safest man as well as their most assured. And they trust him to get his own way, which means that they trust him to give the party its own way. They do not fear to see him indulge in empty threats. They expect him to find a way out of the difficulty before them. They trust and they expect it for one reason, because they know his method. They have absolute faith in his discretion; they never doubt his tenacity. He will not give them away, and he will not give in. As for his personal quality, they realise that he is a man of charming manner, whose upper crust of ice is quickly melted. His more personal relations with his own ministers sometimes partake almost of affection.

During his fine tribute to Mr. Runciman for his part

in the attempted Education compromise, Mr. Asquith's voice shook with emotion. The interest of his hearers was aroused in what was a quite obviously sincere expression of friendship. But they were interested for another reason. They saw their chief for a moment in a new light. They who had held him the wise, slow-moving, certain man, resolved upon getting his own way, saw him not scornful, not stern, not bitter, but oppressed by a great disappointment of a great hope of a final religious peace. It was a reticent display of feeling, as from such a source it would be, but it lifted men to a new level of emotion and to new thoughts of their leader. Those who heard, and later, those who read, thought they discerned a new note in the voice. Hitherto his political faith has seemed to some to want spirituality, to lack vision. But into Mr. Asquith's voice there is coming to-day a new note which seems to bear the burden of a fresh spiritual emotion. It is a note which those who have studied his early speeches believe they have heard before. It is a revival, rather than a new thing. But its coming is full of hope for a great future.

Whether that future be great or commonplace, some things seem certain. The first of them is that he will continue to lead. It is idle to talk of the possibilities of the succession of any other minister to the Premiership. As politicians go Mr. Asquith is still young. He should have many years of office in front. Had he not succeeded during the life of the present Parliament it is not certain that he ever would have succeeded. Had Sir Henry survived into the days of Opposition, he might have seen the sceptre, when at last it fell,

grasped by some dashing Radical of the new school. When Mr. Asquith submitted to enter Sir Henry's Cabinet it was not at all certain that he would succeed his chief. But now that he is leader it is quite certain that leader he will remain.

And the prophecy seems warranted that as he goes on before the Liberal forces there will come into his movements a new quickening, into his eyes a new glow, into his faith a new warmth. He will still be the man he was, guided by discretion, full of tenacity. But it will be the larger discretion, the tenacity of inspiration. The passion for reform that is in him, suppressed though it may be still, will find—even now is finding—more frequent opportunities for relief. The old wisdom will forbid it. But that wisdom will not always be obeyed. He will give himself more and more to the work of Progressive Liberalism ; he will find his following ; something of the spirit of the old leaders will burn in him, and put into his mouth words that are not new upon his lips.

“To what purpose do our pioneers go out into the uttermost parts of the earth, win for us every year a few more acres of the waste places of the world, so long as close at our open doors there lies an unweeded garden full of things rank and gross ? It is the business of Englishmen to make England worth living in as well as worth dying for. It is both a higher and a harder task, you may be sure, than to take a city.”

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